

*The*

BREATHLESS MOMENT



MURIEL HINE

















# THE BREATHLESS MOMENT



*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

EARTH  
AUTUMN  
THE HIDDEN VALLEY  
THE BEST IN LIFE  
THE INDIVIDUAL  
APRIL PANHASARD  
HALF IN EARNEST  
THE MAN WITH THE  
DOUBLE HEART



THE  
BREATHLESS MOMENT

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BY  
MURIEL HINE *Coxon*



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To  
D'ARCY M. DAWES







BOOK I







# THE BREATHLESS MOMENT

## CHAPTER I

WITH the letter tightly clasped in her hand, Sabine turned away from the office and paused at the head of the shallow steps leading to the hotel gardens.

A stout gentleman on the porch, enjoying an equally stout cigar, glanced up with appreciation, endeavouring to catch her eye. Failing in this, he resorted to speech.

"Going to be hot," he suggested with a suitably judicial air.

Sabine nodded absently, her fingers playing with the seal, as yet unbroken, of the letter.

"Unusually hot for the time of year." The elderly bore believed in persistence. "Though *you* look cool enough, Miss Fane." He continued to stare at the silent figure, slim in her straight linen gown, loosely girdled at the waist. "Nothing like white for a woman — white or black. Don't give me colours! That's where your sex, if I may say so —" He paused, his mouth half-open. Sabine had slipped past him. "Well — !" He grunted, discomfited, watching her skim the hot gravel where little grains of flint glittered under the fierce rays of the sun, and admiring, a trifle grudgingly, her free step, instinct with youth. "She might have had the civility —" He left the grumble unfinished as he saw her turn her dark head; a voice had hailed her from the lawn:

"Come and play? Just a knock-up?" A flapper, alone on the tennis-court, in the midst of practising a vicious over-hand "serve," was waving her racket invitingly.

Sabine resisted the temptation.

"Not just now. Later, perhaps."

"Oh, very well!" The flapper scowled and cut a ball across the net with a backward kick of a long, thin leg encased in



diaphanous silk stocking. The elderly gentleman moved his chair to a better point of vantage, and resumed his study of the sex.

On went Sabine, avoiding a group of people under a shady tree, one of whom beckoned to her, and, skirting the thick valerian hedge where the dull red flowers drooped in the heat, she passed through a little gate and emerged on to no man's land, a strip of wiry, sun-bleached turf fringing the edge of the cliff. This she crossed and made her way down a zigzag path to where a bench, sheltered by feathery tamarisk, commanded a wide view of the bay. Beyond the seat a diminutive landslip had loosened the rich red soil, forming a natural barricade. Here was the solitude she sought.

She settled herself on the low bench. In the action was the unconscious grace of a woman sure of herself and accustomed to move in a social crowd. It added to the sense of perfection in every line of her dress, simple yet dainty, holding a hint of dignity unusual in youth. A "girl of the world," some man had called her, and the epithet had been well-chosen.

Beneath her lay the blue sea, smooth and metallic, motionless, save where a quiver ran along the border of the pebbly beach, or its sucked-in breath marked the presence of a half-submerged rock. The sky was like a tight blue cloth, without a crease, through which the sun had burnt a hole with frayed edges. In the still air was the presage of thunder.

"Now!" said Sabine and opened her letter.

Her face was pale beneath its tan. Her mouth — the one perfect feature in her irregular, charming face — was compressed to a thin, red line, betraying the tension of her mood.

She went through the letter deliberately twice, as though committing the words to heart, with no quickening of the breath, no flicker of the lowered eyelids. Only her dark brows drew together, suggestive of concentration.

Finally she raised her head and stared out across the sea, oblivious of the picture made by the slumbering fishing-fleet, brown sails sagging limply, becalmed on the other side of the bay.



Slowly, in the depths of her eyes — brown eyes with golden lights — something stirred: a flicker of laughter. For, a shade bewildered, she realised that her most definite sensation was not of despair but of relief; an immense relief that bordered humour.

To know the worst; to be sure at last; to have done with those endless legal letters and stand braced, to meet the future — what a relief, what a blessed relief! Spontaneously she laughed aloud. And with the clear, musical note a memory rose of her father, on a certain night when he had learnt of the failure of a speculation dear to his heart — one of many! She could see again that handsome face, dark with anger and resentment, and then the swift bewildering change, typical of his volatile nature, as he digested the sorry jest, the loss but whetting his appetite for further fields of adventure. Yes, she was a Fane too. She straightened her graceful shoulders. Life was not only a question of ease, of monotonous, fair sailing; life at its best was a sporting affair, of taking risks with a tight lip, winning here, losing there. This was a new test of courage.

“All the same,” she thought aloud, “I’m glad the poor old darling’s gone, before this war — that he didn’t know. It’s odd that his one impulse of prudence should have ended in disaster. If he’d left his money where it was there would have been a certain income. But now Germany is the winner.” Her eyes grew sombre. “That’s what hurts! How I wish we’d never gone to Frankfort and met Baron von Freiling and his friends. To say nothing of his wife!”

A faint smile, half-pitiful, half-charged with irony, was checked by teeth that caught her lip. She felt the sudden fear of those who think lightly of the dead.

For Fane’s weakness had not escaped the eyes of his only daughter. She knew the extent of his attraction for the opposite sex and how it had formed a useful lever in his business, yet become at times a dangerous weapon that turned against the man himself in the crises of emotion. With all his knowledge of the world he had preserved a curious freshness, an exuberance of vitality, that warred with the caution of his brain. His affair



with the German Baroness had been the last of a long series of Continental adventures. In *this* instance the husband had scored.

Sabine's mind drifted back, through the changing scenes of early years, to her mother, a gracious presence but always remote, absorbed in her husband and the endless whirl of social endeavour.

Her money, generously offered, had been the turning-point in his fortune. Connected with an insurance firm of good standing but old-fashioned views, Fane, shortly after his marriage, decided upon a more vigorous programme, sacrificing the capital his wife had brought him in a course of entertaining, at first sight reckless, but justified by results. Wherever the gay crowd moved, there could be found Fane and his wife and the open hospitality of their villa or their yacht. They sowed money and reaped it twofold. Fane's gambling spirit was satisfied.

Homburg, Cairo, Trouville, Monte were the brief stations of Sabine's childhood between the longer intervals of her education at Lausanne, a convenient centre for her parents. Often she spent her holidays at the pleasant Swiss school, or in some quiet *pension* with Dillon, her faithful nurse, half-forgotten by her mother save for brief flying visits. But, after the latter's sudden death, Fane, stunned by the heavy blow, had turned instinctively to his daughter. To Sabine there opened out a magical life, shorn of lessons beyond a few accomplishments, in her father's company at an age when most English girls are kept firmly in the background. She rose to it like an eager fledgling. At twenty-one she was on a par mentally with the average woman ten years her senior; a competent mistress of a house, an able linguist, with perfect assurance and a secret distrust of the ways of men which, without embittering her outlook, preserved her from the obvious pitfalls of her father's easy rule. Not that he neglected her or permitted any light adventure. But thoughtlessly, as the years rolled on, he accepted this girl with her clever brain, her love of life which equalled his own, and her charm inherited from himself, as his equal and confidante, filling the gulf left by his wife. They were partners in the Great Game, with few reserves and a mutual indulgence.



She saved him from remarriage; at once his excuse and his defence. For Fane loved his liberty. But she could not save him from the results of his ardent temperament, though at first he shielded her from the knowledge. Only his wife could have done this. Mixing in a gay crowd, cosmopolitan in its morals, her young eyes probed his secrets. They bred in her, after the first bewilderment and disillusion, an unusual clearness of vision. Men were plainly polygamists. It behoved her, therefore, to be wary and hold aloof from romance, enjoying their society, but resolute in her reserves.

When in doubt she turned to Dillon, a true-hearted Irish-woman who occupied a position more akin to friendship than to service and never swerved in her loyalty to her widowed master and his child.

Her homely philosophy — the philosophy of a peasant accepting the "ways of Nature," a shade biased where her affections were inextricably involved — proved a refuge and consolation to her sorely puzzled charge. If "Dilly" knew, it was all right. "Dilly's" statement that "the master, bless him," must not be hardly judged on account of his "great sorrow" and the "charm of him that lepped to the eyes," held good for many a day. Yet it made her fastidious in her friendships. For her were no maiden fancies. Only an exceptional man, as yet unmet, could reconcile her to the disadvantages of a state so intimate as marriage, yet bound by so frail a tie.

Life, meanwhile, was very pleasant, full of movement and adventure. The gaiety that goes hand in hand in the South with all love intrigue, so different from the gloomy remorse that seems to haunt Northern races, blurred the issue, and Sabine's youth detected the element of sport.

At times she watched her father's skill with the fairer sex in admiration, scolding him openly, a twinkle in her brown eyes. Fane, shameless, would plead guilty but suggest that it was "good for business."

Yet, oddly enough, the happiest year in all their wandering companionship had for its setting a quiet house in a green Eng-



lish lane. Fane's health had been failing fast. Settling his business he retired to the old scenes of his boyhood, renting a small property with beautiful grounds in the West Country.

Here were new joys for Sabine. Long rides, when his health permitted, with Fane, aged but ever brilliant, and quiet evenings devoted to books, music and drifting conversation, opened up to the young girl another vista more generous in its simple happiness, cleaner, sweeter than she had known. For the first time she owned her father. She took the country to her heart. England claimed her, the home of her forbears. Even the narrow moral code that refused to probe beneath the surface, drawing a rigid black line between conventional virtue and vice, held something definite and restful. The sense of the cruel parting before them — for Fane was doomed from the start — brought a more poignant touch of affection into the still and tranquil days. She knew that love which is, perhaps, the sweetest in a woman's life when a virile man attacked by weakness turns to his dear one to drain courage and consolation through darkest hours.

His end justified his creed of the gambler's luck, and upset all conventional theories. No saint could have had a more peaceful passing. As Sabine kissed the still lips that had brushed so many laughing cheeks, now cold but fixed in a peaceful smile, she could thank God brokenly that pain held no more terrors for him.

There followed long, blank days as the leaves grew golden and slipped from the trees and Dillon watched over the living and wove strange fancies around the dead. In the depths of her faithful heart she was assured of Fane's "salvation." A mere pinch of Purgatory and then reunion with Sabine's mother, waiting proudly in Paradise where he would have a fine welcome. Not even the Blessed Virgin herself could withstand "the master's charm"!

Winter was to be the test of Sabine's new-found love of the country. She emerged victorious from the ordeal and at the end of the short lease, left with regret the low, white house with its fern-like cloak of wistaria.



Spring found the pair in London to complete affairs with the lawyers. Partly on Baron von Freiling's advice but mainly through the curious fear of a man who feels the approach of death and becomes insecure in his own opinions, Fane had invested the greater part of his capital, weakened by speculations, in various German industrial stocks with which his new friend was connected. No shadow of war then dimmed the land and Sabine, though temporarily affected by the death duties and standing debts, was assured of a good income. She escaped from the dust and noise of London to a quiet hotel in Devonshire where she could "economize" — as she called it — and make plans for the future.

Although she still mourned her father, the knowledge that an outward show of grief would have been repugnant to him and her own healthy common sense forced her out into the open. She made friends easily with the pleasant holiday crowd, more or less stunned and incredulous when war suddenly broke loose, but optimistic as to its length. It was more obvious in the papers than in its effect on daily life in this quiet backwater, washed by those waves which England still ruled and buttressed by Tradition.

Then, like a shell from the far-off guns, fell the ominous legal warning, followed by others — long-winded, involved — camouflaging financial ruin. For weeks she had hung on the brink of disaster, hoping, fearing, no definite news available in the vast *débâcle* and harassed by uncertainty.

Now, at last, she knew the worst. The capital was locked up, if not irretrievably lost; there could be no dividends. Her credit at the bank was low. From a solitary English source she could expect, if all went well, a pittance that amounted to her normal expenses in shoes and gloves. Otherwise she had no prospects. The senior partner who had known her father for many years wrote a grave letter of sympathy and advised her to seek "a home with relations."

Sabine smiled, her eyes on the sea, considering this suggestion. Fane had cut himself adrift long since from his family, but at his funeral a gaunt brother had appeared with an air of conferring



a favour; had engaged and lost in a passage of arms with Dillon, who resented his manner and his suspicious questionings, retiring finally with the air of washing his hands of the younger branch. Mrs. Fane had been an orphan; there were no links to reforge on that side. "Uncle Herbert" stood alone. Sabine played for a moment with the appalling thought of turning to him for assistance.

"I think that Charity would be strained on both sides," she decided, "in a 'home' with Uncle Herbert. Though it might be diverting to watch Dilly — " She paused, aghast. For the first time the full force of the blow reached her. She could no longer afford a maid. Dillon was involved in her ruin.

The dazzling scene ran blurred before her; brown sails and blue sea merged in an opalescent mist. With an effort she mastered the feeling of panic, clutching at a saving grace.

"But Dilly is provided for. She can't starve. Thank Heaven! I'm glad the old darling thought of that." Her beautiful mouth took a tender curve.

For Fane had rewarded the faithful creature a few months before his death with the gift of an annuity that brought her in eighty pounds a year. He foresaw that a large sum in money might lay her open to designs wearing a matrimonial cloak, at the hands of some worthless fellow. Unwittingly he secured for her a steadier income than for his child.

A whimsical idea caught Sabine as she realised the situation: Dilly, mistress of a cottage and herself the dutiful maid-of-all-work. A paradox bred by war!

"I shouldn't mind." Her eyes twinkled. "I'd rather clean Dilly's boots any day than Uncle Herbert's. To begin with they'd be smaller!"

From the rocks below a clamour rose, some sharp dispute among the gulls. Silvery wings flashed in the sunshine. Then, as swiftly as it had begun, the raucous outburst died away, swallowed up in the sultry peace. Sabine leaned forward, chin propped on her slender hands, the light glinting from off her rings and drawing a flash from the steel buckles on her pretty grey shoes.



"And those aren't paid for yet," she thought.

The rueful reminder steadied her. It was no use dreaming in the sunshine. She must evolve some plan of action. To what purpose could her education and knowledge of life be put at this juncture? She would never live on charity and as to marriage — she shrugged her shoulders. She was no great believer in love. She had seen its shadow, satiety, dogging passion too closely. Resolutely she put away the memory of two men who had refused to abandon hope.

"I shall never sell myself," she decided. "If it has to come, love must be a gift."

By her side on the blistered bench was a crumpled copy of the *Times*, left by a former occupant. She picked it up and opened it at the crowded advertisement page. It might give her some idea of posts open at the moment.

The war checked her at the outset. Languages were her strongest asset. But who needed a travelling companion, or a foreign chaperon nowadays? The Continent was forbidden ground, given over to the armies. As yet there had been no call for women to replace men, though an eager rush to Red Cross lectures had resulted from the first demand for hospital work. The nursing profession entailed long training and she could not afford to undertake any voluntary task. There remained the traditional rôle for women thrown back on their own resources, and educated: to teach the young. She studied the openings for governesses.

She found her knowledge inadequate. To speak diplomatic French without competent mathematics and a whole host of other subjects, music, harmony, elocution, "physical culture" — whatever that meant — was to descend obviously to the rank of "nursery governess" according to the *Times's* requirements. Salary thirty pounds a year! Sabine gave a scornful chuckle.

"Dilly's boots before that! What an amazing amount they expect. With 'refinement', 'good temper', superb health and 'religion.' In return for a mere pittance — sufficient to hide one's nakedness. Impossible to *dress* on it! I'd far sooner be a



servant. They are decently provided for and allowed some liberty. I could insist on my 'days out'!" She laughed aloud at the thought.

But she struggled on through the dazzling print, past "competent nurses" and "mother's helps" — a post that set her wondering — to "lady-cooks," the baits too obvious, until she came to "housekeepers."

The heading brought a faint sense of relief. It held a certain suggestion of power, a midway post between ruler and ruled. She felt an amused interest in it. If she had managed her father's house in many countries, adapting herself to local conditions of service and food, surely her experiences fitted her for this post in England, with all its wealth of home comforts.

"I should have some corner to myself, even if it were a bare one." She smoothed out the crumpled sheet before her. "I might even find room for Dilly. She'd undertake any work to live under the same roof. Or she could settle in a cottage in the vicinity. I could visit her on my 'evenings out'." Her optimism clutched at the straw.

She began to consider it seriously.

There were only four advertisements. The first three she passed over. They were for London and the suburbs and her scheme called for a rural background. But the last fulfilled this requirement.

WANTED: a lady to undertake the management of a quiet house and light secretarial duties. No housework save charge of dairy. Two in family. Four servants. Must be able to drive and fond of the country. Good salary if competent. Permanent situation. Write Val-lance, Liddingcombe, Devon.

She read it through thoughtfully, caught by something in the wording.

"It's original. 'Secretarial duties'? I wonder what that implies? Either the owner's been well served or is a confirmed idealist to add that 'Permanent situation' as a lure to the modern



retainer. Or perhaps it means that it's not for War-time, to end when Peace is declared? But it doesn't ask me to be a Christian according to my employer's creed. Only to understand my business! That's a distinct advantage. With no allusion to my temper — I needn't even be 'refined'! Liddingcombe? The name's familiar. If it's anywhere near here I've a great mind to go prospecting before I write. I'd prefer to form my own impressions, and letters are rarely enlightening."

She tore out the advertisement and rose to her feet. For a long moment she studied the blue expanse of sea. It seemed to embody a sense of freedom and there came a tightening at her heart.

Far away on the sky-line were two long dots that moved swiftly. Her eyes narrowed. Ships of war. She turned on herself angrily. Across that strip of blue water there were men fighting, giving their lives for the freedom of the world, and yet she shrank from a touch of discomfort!

Work? It was a fine adventure. Meanwhile there was Dilly to soothe and placate — poor, dear, old Dilly!

"And that's the hardest part," thought Sabine.



## CHAPTER II

**T**HERE were no cabs at Lidding Junction. A five-mile walk lay before Sabine, "seeking a situation" — the first check to her ardour.

The narrow lanes with their high banks were oppressively hot and deep in dust as she tramped on determinedly, recalling the station-master's directions.

Lidding St. Mary would come first, with its village and the manor house. Then the turning near the church that would lead her to the path by the river, which wound between high wooded banks on its last great adventure, meeting its tidal lover in the fishing hamlet of Liddingcombe.

The station-master had been vague in answer to Sabine's eager questions regarding her destination, his knowledge of Liddingcombe confined apparently to the fact that an aunt of his had once lived there and found it very "out o' the way." It could not compare with Lidding Junction for purposes of gaiety.

Sabine smiled, remembering this, as she trudged on through the sleepy silence. She seemed to be mounting steadily, with little dips between the hills where she drew breath in the shade of the trees that clung to the verdant hollows. But, at last, after a sterner climb she emerged on to open moorland, where the gorse stretched in yellow waves, beating back the fierce heat like a golden shield, faintly studded by dwarfed bushes of whortleberry. Here and there a vivid patch of sun-stained moss marked the source of a dried-up spring amidst spikes of rush. Larks sang in the blue heavens.

"I wonder they're not cooked," thought Sabine, blinking in the dazzling glare.



She sat down on a hillock to remove an intrusive pebble that had found its way into one grey shoe.

The solitude seemed overpowering. Still nursing her injured foot she scanned the wide scorching prospect. In vain she sought for the church spire of Lidding St. Mary, the promised landmark dwelt upon by the station-master. No sign of human habitation loomed up on the hazy horizon; only the far-off line of the sea.

She thought of Dillon, red-eyed, prophetic, from whom she had parted at the hotel, obstinate in her contention that her mistress was "never intinded for work. And what would the poor master (God rest him) say? With her living on his money!" No good would come from this expedition. If only she would be "led by Dilly."

The faithful creature had pleaded in vain for a cottage maintained by her savings, together with the annuity, where Sabine could keep up a modest farce of gentility, whilst Dillon laboured to support them both "till the cloud blew over." The war could not last for long. Dillon here was optimistic. Meanwhile an active woman could easily find daily employment. There was no need for Fane's daughter to dream of "soiling her pretty hands."

But Sabine held to her intention, kissing away the old woman's tears. Dilly could live in a cottage close by and keep an eye on her darling. She was set upon going to Liddingcombe.

Now Dillon's parting words recurred to her, with their flicker of temper: "'Tis lost you'll be in them heathenish parts. With tramps and the heat beyond bearing. 'Tis going agin the face of Nature."

Sabine, smoothing her silk stocking, decided that the face of Nature on Lidding Moor was not reassuring. Had she, by chance, missed the road?

Across her mood, which veered between exasperation and amusement, came a distant and most welcome sound, the steady beat of approaching hoofs. She glanced back along the road with a lightening of the spirit. On the brow of the hill was a black dot that resolved itself into a heavy landau, drawn by a strong



pair of horses in charge of a burly coachman, grotesque in a new panama. Beside him was revealed its twin on the head of a lean footman. Both men were in plum-coloured livery, their buttons glinting in the sunshine. The yellow wheels of the carriage added a touch of magnificence.

Sabine hurriedly slid on her shoe and stood up. Here was a chance of settling the doubt in her mind. As the carriage slowly drew abreast she stepped forward and hailed the coachman. He seemed to be half-asleep and drew in his horses with a jerk.

"Liddingcombe?" He stared at her stupidly, resenting the check.

From the roomy interior of the landau came a drowsy voice:

"Eh? What's that?"

Sabine, despairing of the driver, turned her attention to his employer.

She saw a stout, red-faced woman propped up against a cushion of plum-coloured silk, her eyes blinking; small but good-humoured eyes buried in fat that seemed to invade the whole of her ornate person.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I'm afraid I've lost my way." Instinctively Sabine smiled; the stout lady looked so friendly. "I'm trying to get to Liddingcombe. Is this the direct road?"

"You don't mean Lidding St. Mary?" In the question was an eagerness that puzzled Sabine.

"Well, partly. I understand that comes first — that Liddingcombe is farther still?"

"A good mile," said the stout lady. She put up a hand in a tight kid glove and straightened a hat that seemed to contain every well-known type of flower; then solemnly raised her *lorgnette* and stared at the questioner. This scrutiny seemed to satisfy her. "It's a long step." Her smile widened. "If you like" — she hesitated, then plunged — "I could give you a lift. I live at the Manor, Lidding St. Mary. I'm on my way 'ome now."

Sabine, inwardly taken aback, murmured indistinct thanks.



The footman descended from the box slowly. His lean face looked mistrustful as he opened the carriage door.

"He doesn't approve," thought Sabine, amused. "But I'm not going to lose this gift from the gods."

"It's very kind of you," she said, aloud, to her benefactress; "it is so hot, walking, to-day."

"Then get in, m'dear," said the stout lady.

The footman solemnly arranged the dust-cloth across her knees. It had a large monogram embroidered in plum-colour in the centre, a J and G intertwined. The carriage rolled on again. Sabine leaned back with a sigh of relief.

"Perhaps you're staying in these parts?" Again the girl caught a note of eagerness in the question, but without waiting for an answer the stout lady babbled on: "If so, you'll have heard of me. I'm Lady Gull." She stole a glance sideways to mark the effect of this. "Wife of Sir Joshua Gull. Lidding St. Mary's our country seat."

The thought flashed across Sabine that it must be a solid one.

"Indeed?" She steadied her expression. "It's a charming country, isn't it?"

"So every one says." The stout lady appeared to be undecided. "I dare say I'll get used to it. You see I come from the North. I suppose I miss the old faces. We knew *every one* in Bradford. Every one as was worth knowing." She sank deeper into her cushion. "If I go to sleep, mind you wake me. I'm afraid it's a bad 'abit of mine. My daughter's always at me about it. But there's something in carriage exercise that makes me want to shut me eyes."

"It's drowsy weather," Sabine responded, struggling with her inward mirth.

"Ah, you feel the 'eat yerself?" The stout lady looked pleased. "Henrietta's so energetic. Never still, like 'er father! I don't wonder that she's thin. Too thin." She laid stress on the words with a faint vindictiveness. "In my time we thought a girl — a young girl — ought to be plump, but now they want to look like flag-poles. And I'm sure they don't enjoy life, not as we used to."



So restless! Perhaps it's their education." Her head nodded. She stirred herself. "You mustn't think I'm not proud of my girl. She's wonderful — bent on improvement. Always improving something or some one, or what she calls 'social conditions.' But the trouble is, at Lidding St. Mary, they don't *want* to be improved. And they aren't grateful. It 'urts my daughter, though she won't give in. She's that sort. P'raps you think it's odd of me saying all this to a stranger?" She was suddenly on the defensive.

"Not at all. It's so interesting." Sabine met the anxious glance sideways with a soothing smile. She felt a queer touch of pity for her new friend who was plainly made for a different setting and who found herself lonely as lady of the manor. "I understand the difficulty. The West Country's conservative. It doesn't take kindly to new methods. It's quite contented with the old."

"You're right, m'dear." The flower-burdened hat nodded and sank to rest again. "That's what I tell Henrietta. And we can't expect 'em to take to *us* until we've lived among 'em more. She was so popular at Bradford, but of course they were our own 'ands."

Sabine looked rather puzzled. The term was a new one to her.

"The girls in our own mill," Lady Gull kindly explained. "When she first came 'ome from Newnham she got up a girls' club, for lectures and debates, you know. She tried to do the same here. But they're more ambitious in the North, and Henrietta 'managed' them. She's great on such a lot of subjects. I get very mixed at times. Suffrage and 'ealth and Sanitation. And 'ousing—that's 'er latest fad. I suppose you wouldn't believe it now, but she got round Sir Joshua — who's, well, careful of his money, or we shouldn't be where we are at present — to pull down some cottages in Dead Man's Lane (that's the poorest part of the village where there's always sickness) in order to build brand-new ones. And they wouldn't 'ave it. Such a to-do! You'd 'ave thought that we was robbing them. The people as lived in them, I mean. In the end it came to nothing and Sir Joshua saved his money. But it *was* a blow to Henrietta."



In the final phrase Sabine caught a faint hint of satisfaction. She smiled. Lady Gull smiled back.

"I sometimes think, between you and me, it's her own way she wants more than improvement, when all's said! But then, of course, she's disappointed." She stared out across the gorse.

Sabine felt curious. Would this indiscreet stout lady reveal further family secrets? Her next remark suggested caution.

"Are you going to friends at Liddingcombe?"

"No. Only to see the place. I'm quite a stranger in these parts. I know no one this side of the county."

"Then you don't miss much," said Lady Gull.

It was uttered so tartly that Sabine looked up, surprised, from her amused scrutiny of a carriage basket in front of her filled with various "requisites" in leather, or with gilt tops and a monogram engraved upon them. In the centre was a gold card-case flanked by a visiting book.

"Is that so?" Full of mischief she ventured to probe farther. "You're not fortunate in your neighbours?"

"They're not what I'd *choose*," said Lady Gull. "Not friendly." She lowered her voice with a warning gesture of the white kid gloves towards the servants. "It seems strange, after the 'appy days at Bradford. The 'ouse was always full then. But here it's very different. I'm sure I go out of my way to welcome people to the Manor, and they can't complain of anything. The food's always of the best. Sir Joshua's most 'ospitable and more than generous with subscriptions. But they're stand-offish. They call once and I return it, and that's all. There's no friendly dropping-in. And yet — that's what makes me wild" — her fat face took on a purplish hue, Sabine watched it with alarm — "they crosses the park at all hours and down the lane to Liddingcombe to call on those *Vallances*!"

The name came out with an open venom. Sabine gave a little start. For a moment she felt guilty. Ought she to enlighten her hostess? On second thoughts she refrained. It would be so difficult to explain. There was no reason to expect that she would suit her prospective employer. The journey might prove



a fruitless one, and she had definitely stated that she knew no one in the place. She temporized accordingly.

"Some people whom you — dislike?" It was said to cover time, but it brought the deluge down upon her.

"I should think so! If I'd known I'd have stopped Sir Joshua from buying the place. Of course you don't see the point? They used to own Lidding St. Mary — though *we* bought it from the people as took it first off their 'ands. An extravagant lot, idle, shiftless! No wonder they came down in the world. And yet they think no end of themselves and are worshipped by the villagers, who throws them up in our faces — especially Henrietta's!" She paused, flushed and incoherent.

"They live now in Liddingcombe?" Sabine succumbed to temptation.

Lady Gull, panting, nodded. As soon as she had recovered her breath, she went on with her story.

"Yes. Down by the sea — lording it over the fisher-folk. In a house that can't compare with the Manor! There's only Miss Vallance left, with her nephew, but you'd think that the whole place belonged to them. A meddling lot and that shabby! I'm sure I felt quite ashamed to be talking to the aunt — in her gardening apron and sun-bonnet, with no gloves on her 'ands — in the post office yesterday, when Lady Mallison drove up. And then if she didn't get out and kiss Miss Vallance on both cheeks and take her off to tea with her, just as she was — such an object! Why, there's Henrietta!" She broke off in her tirade and straightened the unruly hat. "Of course all this is *entry-nous*," she added with sudden nervousness.

"Of course." Sabine followed her glance.

They had left the moor in their wake and were now descending a steep hill, brakes grinding, the burly coachman holding the horses well in hand. Woods stretched away to the left and against a gate beneath the trees a girl leaned, watching their progress, a bicycle propped up beside her.

Lady Gill fidgeted.

"Will you — May I ask your name?"



"Fane." Sabine divined her intention. "But wouldn't your daughter like my place? It's so shady now, I can easily walk."

"Oh, no, m'dear." The good-natured creature hastily checked the suggestion. "I'm going to take you to Lidding St. Mary. Henrietta's bicycling. Besides, there's 'eaps of room for both."

The carriage, obedient to a gesture from the waiting figure, came to a halt.

Sabine saw a tall girl with a moody face and cold grey eyes, inquiringly turned in her direction.

Lady Gull introduced the pair, fluttering through her explanations.

"*Fane*," repeated Henrietta. "Had you a sister up at Newnham?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

The girl, indifferent, turned to her mother. "If I'm late, don't wait dinner for me. It all depends on what train I catch."

Lady Gull looked inquisitive.

"But where are you off to, Henrietta? You mustn't ride back after dark across the moor. It isn't safe. I know your father wouldn't like it."

"Safe!" Henrietta laughed. The sound was unexpectedly youthful. For her whole appearance was mature. Fine lines marked her forehead under the severe straw hat that was wedged down behind on a hillock of light mouse-coloured plaits.

It matched her short serge skirt, beneath which her thin legs showed like sticks in their black thread stockings. For the rest she wore a silk sports coat of an indefinite yellow hue that added to her sallowness. About her was an air of aggression as though she scented interference on all sides and was quick to meet it.

"Appallingly purposeful," thought Sabine. "That tight mouth knows no mercy. She will ride rough-shod over people's feelings and hammer ideas into their heads. I pity the tenants at Lidding St. Mary."

Meanwhile Lady Gull was trying to influence her daughter.

"Do let me send the dog-cart? Or James could take his bicycle and wait for you at the station —"



Henrietta, frowning, checked her. She glanced up at the listening coachman.

"Home," she said very distinctly.

The carriage, with a jerk, rolled onward.

Lady Gull had subsided.

"So independent!" Her voice shook. "I suppose it's the fault of her education — bringing girls up like boys! I never did approve of it. But she gets round Sir Joshua. P'raps one day she'll fall in love." She sniffed, tearful. "I've always 'oped that marriage would be 'er portion. Though she doesn't care for men — except in the lump, so to speak, for boys' classes and so forth. A baby would do her a lot of good — soften 'er. There's nothing like it."

Sabine cheerfully acquiesced.

"I see you're sensible, m'dear. What with this war and Henrietta, I've about as much as I can bear. I often wish I was back at Bradford. It wasn't such a fine 'ouse, but it 'ad its advantages. Though the back of it faced the mill. That dusty — when it blew —"

Her voice had been slowly running down like the works of a clock in need of winding. It ended in a little sigh. Her eyes closed. Peacefully, without a pause, she slid into slumber.

On went the sleek horses past a lodge and closed gates, suggesting feudal privacy, and into a winding village road with picturesque scattered cottages under the still eye of a church where a clock stared down beneath the 'spire.

Lady Gull's mouth was open. Her double chin was propped on her breast above a large pearl pendant, her hat tilted over her nose.

Sabine felt helpless. There was the lane by the rectory, that led to the valley and Liddingcombe. They drifted past it and on again. In desperation she touched the footman with the end of her sunshade. He turned and looked at her haughtily.

"Will you tell the coachman to stop, please. I get out here." Instinctively she waited for him to open the door.

In his brief moment of hesitation she read the covert disrespect of the servant accustomed to gentle service *vis-à-vis* to



his own class risen in authority. She gave him one glance. He sprang to attention. She stepped down noiselessly.

"Will you thank her ladyship for me and say that I did not like to disturb her?"

"Yes, miss." He touched his hat.

From the carriage came stertorous breathing. Sabine smiled, picking her way across the hot dusty road to the path beneath the yew hedge. It sheltered the still churchyard as though jealously guarding the dead from the thoughtless turmoil of the living.

The footman solemnly mounted the box.

" . . . and walks like a lady," he told the coachman. "I'm glad you moved on sharp down the hill or I'd have been sent for *'enrietta*."



### CHAPTER III

**T**HE wall fascinated Sabine. In rough-hewn stone it straggled up the hill away from the glare of the sea, and over it peeped curious faces; gossiping clusters of Gloire de Dijon, sunflowers that followed the course of their god, and the pointed spires, alive with bells, of campanula and hollyhock.

It reminded her of some fairy tale, an enchanted place without visible entrance; no sign of the blue door prophesied by the fisherman's wife on the beach below, stretching her primitive washing, secured by pebbles, to bleach in the sunshine. That good soul had smiled at Sabine with a shrewd glance at the sound of the name. It would seem as though, in Liddingcombe, to ignore the home of the Vallances were to proclaim oneself thoughtlessly as a "foreigner" — to awaken pity tempered by a slight mistrust.

Sabine pondered on these signs. Before her limped an old dog, a spaniel, on three legs, the remaining one tucked up stiffly underneath his silky breast out of the dust and heat of the road. He turned his head, hearing her step and waited, gazing up at her wistfully yet on the alert to assume the defensive if needful.

"Good fellow!" She reassured him. There came a faint sidling movement as she bent nearer, patting his head. "What's the matter, old man? Got a thorn in your foot?"

His liquid eyes studied her. Then he wagged a spindly tail.

"Let's look." She stretched out her hand.

He surrendered himself trustfully, obeying his instinct which informed him that here was a true friend of dogs.

She saw at once what had happened. A twig from some newly cut hedge had been caught up in his coat, and a briar thorn, trodden upon, had resisted his efforts to dislodge it.



Drawing off her chamois gloves and talking to him all the time in a soothing voice, she removed the intruder.

"There you are! Isn't that better? You're not as young as you used to be and it's hot work on three legs. Just try the effect of four."

He seemed to drink in her meaning. Cautiously he experimented, then squirmed round his new friend with a spaniel's gushing gratitude.

It reminded Sabine of Lady Gull.

"The trouble is that you overdo it." She dusted her skirt, soiled by his paws. "It's evident that you mean well, but you show it too openly. And that invites a snub, my dear. Friendship should be approached with respect, not given away with a cup of tea. But there's one thing about *you* which may save the situation. You're well-bred — although you giggle! Down, down!" She pushed him away.

She watched him meekly lumber off. The wall continued on the left. To the right were fields and over the hedge a sleek mouse-coloured Alderney, her jaws moving from side to side, surveyed the stranger with the obtuse melancholy of her species. From far away came the sound of a threshing-machine, broken at times by the creak of some slow-moving cart, with unoiled wheels, and the sleepy "Hup!" as the driver awoke and encouraged his steed.

"Real country," said Sabine softly, "and real sea. If only —" She stopped with a quick indrawing of the breath.

At her feet lay a rusty horse-shoe.

In a moment she had pounced on it. Half-guiltily, she looked behind her.

"Mine!" Superstition held her. "With two nails? For me, and Dilly. There's a splendid augury."

Dusting it with a dock leaf, picked from under the banked hedge, she forced it into the suède bag which held her purse and handkerchief.

On she went, light-footed. The spaniel had disappeared. There, at length, was the blue door. Ajar too. She quickened her steps.



Cautiously, hugging the wall, she peeped through the narrow opening.

A smooth lawn divided her from the house which had a wide veranda and was wreathed in creepers that ventured up to the uneven sloping roof, above which were twisted chimneys, grotesque, like a party of hobgoblins. On either side of the wide porch were placed tubs of fuchsias, weighed down by their royal tassels of purple and red, and a great white cup splashed the green above the door, filling the air with the subtle perfume of magnolias. But what riveted her attention was the human figure on the scene.

A long herbaceous border stretched under the lee of the wall, the home of the peering flowers, and here, a little old lady, in a faded brown overall, a sun-bonnet framing her wrinkled face, was slaying weeds in her own fashion. Sabine watched her, deeply intrigued. With a spud she would dig up the offender; then, from the basket on her arm, produce what looked like wooden scissors spring these out to a vast length, seize the weed and neatly transfer it to the collection that she carried.

She was only a few paces away. So near that the girl in the doorway could note how the blue of the cotton bonnet matched the intent, unsmiling eyes.

Suddenly a breathless "Oh!" escaped the lips of the busy figure. She pounced down on a fat slug and transferred it triumphantly to a bowl of salt water that stood conveniently behind her.

Sabine, in her growing amusement, forgot caution. The blue door moved under the pressure of her shoulder with an ominous creak. She was detected.

The little old lady stared at her for a long moment. Then she spoke.

"They *have* to be killed." Her voice was severe, but the blue eyes seemed a trifle anxious.

"Of course." Sabine, immensely relieved, welcomed the chance of conversation. "They do such endless harm to plants. I was only admiring the clever way you pick up everything."



"With my 'crazy-tongs'?" The other smiled. "They're very handy. My nephew made them. Stooping isn't good for me, and I'm so fond of gardening. But I can manage quite well like this." She extended the implement in question and seized a dislodged dandelion. "There!" She dropped it into her basket.

"It's delightful." Sabine screwed up her courage. "I wonder — Are you Miss Vallance?"

"Yes." On the wrinkled face was a look of ingenuous surprise. It seemed to be an unusual question. "Do you want to see me? Won't you come in?"

Sabine crossed the low step.

"Thank you. If you could spare me a few minutes I should be glad. I've called about an advertisement which appeared in the *Times* yesterday."

"For a housekeeper?" Miss Vallance nodded, suddenly brisk and interested. "It's cooler under the veranda."

She led the way to where two chairs flanked a little wicker table in the shadow of the creepers.

Sabine, obedient to a sign from her companion, seated herself. The chair slid backward. She gave a start.

"I ought to have warned you," said Miss Vallance. "Mark put rollers on to that one to make it easy for me to move. I'm not allowed to lift things — it's a great handicap. He's so clever in inventing trifles that add to my comfort. Unusually thoughtful for a man. I tell him he ought to have been a woman!" Her smile was tender beneath its humour.

Into Sabine's mind there flashed an imaginative picture of the second inmate of the house: a little man, inclined to fuss, tied to his aunt's apron strings, a gentle domesticated creature, always busied with small matters. She murmured something vague and pleasant.

Miss Vallance leaned back and folded her thin, well-shaped hands on the pocket of her overall from which a wisp of raffia protruded.

"So you know of a housekeeper," she suggested. "Perhaps she has lived with you?" Her eyes ran over the girl's dress, simple



but in the latest fashion, and lingered on the grey suède shoes and high-arched slender feet.

Sabine explained hurriedly.

"Oh, no. I came for myself."

Miss Vallance stared at her.

"For *yourself*?"

"Yes. I think that I could undertake all that you seem to require. I've managed a number of houses and servants, both abroad and in England. I can drive, of course, and I write a good hand. It's only the dairy —" She broke off. It was more difficult than she had dreamed.

"But you're far too young," said Miss Vallance slowly. "Besides —" There came an eloquent pause.

"You didn't state any age?"

"I know. That was Mark's fault. He said if we put 'about forty' we should have a swarm of decrepit people who hoped to end their days in comfort. He's very obstinate sometimes." She gave a little helpless gesture, but a twinkle lay in her blue eyes.

Sabine laughed, the strain relaxed.

"He was quite right. I remember once, when we wanted a steward on the yacht, we had the same experience. You never saw such people! One old man might have posed for Michael Angelo's *Moses*." Suddenly the conviction of all this heedless speech revealed struck her. She went on nervously, "But I don't think that *youth* matters. It's really experience that counts and I've seen a great deal of life."

"I imagine so," said the little old lady.

Here she had a further surprise.

Sabine leaned across the table, her face earnest, the beautiful mouth curved with a suggestion of pride.

"If you think that I'm frivolous," she said, "you're much mistaken. I've certainly lived in the midst of gaiety, but I don't need it. I've always felt that it lacked something — something real. I only found out what it was when I came back to England and settled in a quiet village miles away from everywhere.



I love the country and country ways — that's my true environment — and I'm not at all afraid of work. I was happier in that old house, where we hardly saw a soul, than in any whirl of social pleasure."

"Then why — ?" Miss Vallance peered at her, taken aback by the girl's candour.

Sabine guessed the rest of the question.

"Why did I leave it? My father died." She looked away over the sea, visible from the higher ground, where the land-locked bay was deeply blue and a wooded spur lay like some feather, dropped from the wing of a passing eagle which had floated down with the river. The sense of its peacefulness filled her heart. She went on composedly, "I have now to earn my own living. I think that I am competent to fill the post advertised. I've been housekeeper to my father since the days of short frocks. And I've made a success of it."

It was said with a quiet dignity that impressed the listening woman.

"I don't doubt it." Her voice was kind. "But it's quite a different thing, my dear, to be mistress in your own house than to fall in with the rules of another. I'm old-fashioned. I have my ways." She paused with an uncertain smile.

Into the depths of the girl's clear gaze there stole a hint of youthful humour.

"I think that I should like your ways. You're thorough, and that's so consoling! You see, I watched you catch that slug."

Miss Vallance tried to steady her face. Then she gave way to a shadowy laugh, the delicate laughter of the old. "An original retainer," she thought. Yet the charm of Fane's daughter drew her. Sabine followed up her advantage:

"I quite expect to be taught. If only you'd teach me gardening! I loved this place from the first glance — the way the house is tucked away inside that long mysterious wall. I christened it 'The Enchanted Garden'." She saw that her listener looked pleased.

She went on easily, describing that part of her old life which



was concerned with domestic duties. Now and again Miss Vallance would interpose with a shrewd question, or a comment betraying interest, but shadowed by her original doubt. Economy now? It seemed to her that the Fanes had spent lavishly. At Liddingcombe it would be a totally different establishment.

Sabine quickly reassured her. The sum allowed for house-keeping during the last year of his life proved that Fane had expected full value for his money. He would speculate without scruple and entertain royally but, even in their most riotous days, in private matters he had been careful and, since their advent in England, the girl herself had taken pride in keeping down house expenses, aware of heavy doctors' bills and the fact that her father had retired. Miss Vallance could find no fault here and at length there came an uncertain pause.

Sabine leaned across the table, studying her companion's face, eagerly searching for confirmation of her awakened hopes.

"It's so difficult to recommend one's own person, isn't it?" Her smile was humourous yet anxious. "But I'm sure you'd find me capable. Won't you give me a month's trial?"

The little old lady hesitated. Then she caught at a fresh excuse.

"I should like to consult Mark first. If only you were not so young! That's the real stumbling-block. I had looked for some one middle-aged. It doesn't matter so much now — but afterwards." What did she mean? Sabine watched her, surprised. "It's hard — yes, very hard." She was obviously talking to herself. "This dreadful war, I suppose? And brought up in luxury. But would it do? I must be wise." She seemed to awake with a start to the knowledge of her audience. "I'm sorry. You're very brave, my dear, and you must have faith. I respect that. And hope — the blessed gift of youth." A wistful light came into the eyes, so candidly blue, that were turned to the girl's. She rose to her feet. "But I'll speak to Mark. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

Sabine watched her pass through the porch, pause to nip off a dead fuchsia with an absent glance, and disappear. She did not guess that the old lady was adding in her own mind:



"An 'Enchanted Garden'! That touched me. But we want no Fairy Princess to wake us. I must think of Mark. I mustn't be led through an impulse of charity. Poor child! She doesn't know what's before her. Oh, this war — this *wicked* war!"

Silence fell on the sloping lawn, save for the drowsy hum of insects. Bees blundered past the veranda, smeared by the sticky gold of pollen, drunk with Summer's ecstasy. From far away came the sleepy song of the threshing machine. It roused in Sabine vague dreams. She saw Dilly lodged in some cottage near the beach, ready to spoil or scold her darling; saw, too, stolen hours swimming in the sunlit sea, long tramps through the green lanes, drives — "I'm sure there's a grey pony" — and, rousing her sense of humour, herself as the "lady housekeeper," capable and conscientious, learning to make peerless butter from the cream of the mouse-coloured Alderney. Dreams — Then, with a faint reaction, that unknown second figure, Mark.

Would he prove the stumbling-block?

"I don't appeal to that type of creature," she told herself. "I can't forgive a lack of virility. I suppose I'm spoilt by memories of my father. He was such a *man*."

She was roused from her speculations by the creak of the blue door. She look up, interested. A fisherman stood on the threshold, tall and fair, finely proportioned. His jersey was open at the throat which was tanned to the colour of a nut. In his hand he carried the spoils of the sea, fish strung by a line through their gills, gleaming like silver in the sunshine. Scales and the rime of salt water still clung to his shabby trousers. On the back of his head was a shapeless hat, framing a lean powerful face, like a halo basely filched from a saint.

"With an offering from the villagers," Sabine thought as he marched up the path, the codlings swinging by his side.

He gave her a sidelong glance and paused. At that moment Miss Vallance appeared on the porch. "Why, there you are! I thought you'd returned. I've been looking for you everywhere." She laid a hand on the fisherman's sleeve. "I want you for a minute, Mark. Rub your shoes — there's a good boy!"



Docile, he followed her into the house.

Sabine drew a deep breath.

So this was the nephew, "meant for a woman!" She checked a wild desire to laugh. They might hear her, she must be cautious. Much depended upon Mark.

"He doesn't look pliable," she decided. "That mouth — and the set of his chin. Now, what's my correct attitude? Humility? Would that flatter him? He doesn't rule in his own house. Miss Vallance is the moving spirit, for all her frailty and age. 'Rub your shoes'! And he did it! Shoes that a tramp would throw in a ditch. They really are a quaint couple. I can understand Lady Gull and her 'so different from Bradford.' I should rather like to see a battle between Mark and Henrietta."

A maid came out on the veranda with a tea-cloth in her hand and spread it over the table deftly, a sidelong glance bestowed on the stranger. She wore an old-fashioned cap with starched frills that accentuated the colour on her healthy face.

Sabine watched her arrange the tray with its fine old lustre cups, deep-bowled and slightly crooked, and the silver teapot, worn thin, that had seen the same generations as the frail, rat-tailed tea-spoons. Here was no crest or monogram, only the subtle hall-mark of age.

She lighted the lamp beneath the kettle and paused to say doubtfully:

"I think that will be quite safe, miss. There's no wind to blow the flame."

"I'll watch it," Sabine reassured her.

The maid thanked her and departed.

In the silence that followed, Sabine caught the sound of voices overhead. They drifted out through some open window.

"If you think she's too young, that ends it. But you need somebody energetic. Otherwise you'd be driven crazy and do all the work yourself. *I know you!*" There followed a man's laugh. "As to her being pretty, I've no particular objection, provided that I'm not expected to make violent love to her."

Sabine quivered with indignation.



"*Mark!*" Miss Vallance sounded vexed.

"Well, look here, old lady, I'm off. I promised Rogers I'd run down and see him about five. Just smuggle me out a cup of tea. Feed the girl and give her her fare and I'll tell Steve to put in the pony. She'll be able to catch the six-five." A pause. "Why, I believe you *want* her? You've been foxing! I know your game. You'd like to put the blame on me, and I flatly refuse to be drawn in. If you fancy her, give her a month's trial. It won't hurt anybody. It might be an experience before the real article." A chuckle. "You'd find out how much they'd stand!"

Silence. Then Miss Vallance spoke.

"I was counting on your help, Mark." It was said with a certain tinge of sadness.

"I'm a brute. Forgive me. I'd — forgotten." There was real repentance in his voice.

"My dear boy — you *are* to forget. I didn't mean to remind you. But so much depends upon it. I don't want to make a mistake. I'll confess that this girl attracted me. She's a lady — I hadn't hoped for that. At least I expected some one Gullish!" Sabine, still angry, had to smile. "It makes things so much easier. She has seen trouble too. She strikes me as being both brave and honest, and it's not our way to refuse help."

"No." Mark sounded grim. "We can help every one but ourselves. That ought to be the family motto."

Sabine squirmed in her chair. To be thought an object for charity? This had not entered into her scheme. "I shall not accept it," she told herself. Then reason came to her rescue. If she made herself indispensable, there would be a turning of the tables. She was not afraid of the work before her. She made up her mind in that moment.

Steps warned her of the approach of the conspirators. Miss Vallance appeared, Mark behind her.

"My nephew." She introduced him, and settled herself before the tea-tray. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Miss — I don't believe you told me your name."



"Fane — Sabine Fane," said the girl. "My godmother was French. I was called Sabine after her."

Miss Vallance nodded, carefully "mothering" the cups. This duty over she looked up, practical and alert.

"I should like to explain a few things. I want some one to take my place and relieve me from all household duties — to give orders, see to the dairy, and replace servants, if required. It is not a very heavy task but I want it done in my own way. At first under my daily guidance. Perhaps you might not care for that?"

"It is what I should prefer," said Sabine. "I think I should soon learn your rules." She felt Mark's eyes fixed on her from where he leaned against the veranda and divined the man's hidden amusement. "I should be pleased to learn — from you." There was the faintest pause before the concluding words. She went on rather quickly, remembering a point she had overlooked, "I must tell you I understand cooking. I can cook, myself." Behind the speech lay the desire to impress Mark with a sense of her capability. She had guessed his thought: "This smart young lady!" Her voice was cool as she continued, "I found when I first managed a house — at the age of sixteen — that in controlling servants it was the greatest help to know what one required of them. Besides this, in times of illness, one is never at their mercy. I know many foreign dishes too, and can teach a servant how to prepare them."

Miss Vallance looked surprised.

"Indeed? A very useful knowledge. But we live very quietly here. My nephew prefers simple food."

For the first time Sabine glanced directly at the listening man. Her eyes ran over his rough clothes and lingered on the shabby shoes. Mark stirred, suddenly restless.

"I'm accustomed to men," she replied coolly, after her acute survey. "When they say they like 'simple food' they generally want it to be of the best."

Into Miss Vallance's blue eyes came a gleam of mischief.

"You're not far wrong."



Mark frowned. Deliberately he threw himself into the fray, with the suggestion of bringing the pair of womenfolk back to business.

"My aunt is not very strong," he explained. "The principal thing is to save her from all — all —" He stuck for want of the right expression.

"Worry," suggested Sabine smoothly.

"Exactly." His voice rasped. "It needs some one capable and — er, quick." Not usually nervous he was disconcerted by the effect this strange girl had on him. He took an immediate dislike to her.

Sabine assented, her face grave, and waited — obviously — for more. She saw him gulp in his throat. Nothing could have been more respectful and patient than her attitude, hands folded in her lap.

"Which is why," said Mark explosively, "I prefer the idea of a month's trial."

"Quite so," Sabine agreed. "I mightn't be — er — quick enough. But there's one thing I haven't gathered. What are the 'secretarial duties'?"

"Oh, that's for my nephew," said Miss Vallance.

Sabine's eyebrows went up.

"You write?" There was faint surprise in her voice.

"It's a small matter." He fidgeted. "It was really an after-thought when we framed the advertisement. On account of the long winter days. It's not important in the least, merely occasional copying work. If you've any objection we can waive it."

Sabine saw her chance at last. She resented his sharp authoritative manner. "On the contrary" — she studied his face — "it sounds as if it might be amusing."

Miss Vallance missed the point and beamed.

"He writes so cleverly. Personally, I *love* his work."

Mark, helpless, glared at her.

"Well," said Miss Vallance, "I really think —" She hesitated and at this crisis there came a sudden interruption. A spaniel, hot and out of breath, bore down on the veranda.



"Vox!" His mistress tried to catch him by the collar as he lumbered past her. "Now, Vox, *do* be good!" She watched him apprehensively, adding to the visitor, "I hope you're not afraid of dogs? He's sometimes —"

Sabine smiled.

"No. I'm very fond of them."

Mark had moved a pace nearer. He, too, watched the dog. It sniffed for a moment round Sabine's skirt uncertainly, recognized her and, thrusting up its black muzzle, laid it genially on her knee.

"*Well!*" Miss Vallance stared at the pair, then, amazed, at her nephew. "Isn't that strange?" There was awe in her voice. She gave a sigh of pleased relief.

"Very." The word was bitten out. For Mark was saying to himself. "That's done it. Damn the dog!"



## CHAPTER IV

SABINE closed her empty trunk, rose from her knees and looked round with a growing satisfaction.

The presence of familiar objects, a row of her favourite books, the photograph of her father and a little tortoise-shell travelling clock, seemed to bring an air of home into the low, somewhat bare sitting-room, with its well-worn carpet and faded chintzes.

The windows looked out over the back, on to out-houses and the kitchen garden. Beyond this, the ground sloped sharply uphill and, on the crest, was a grove of hazels through which a path led to the edge of the distant sea, invisible from this angle. But from her bedroom, up the two steps from where she stood, at the end of the wing, she could catch a glimpse of the smooth rollers and the creamy line as they broke on the beach, above which, irregular, rose the last clump of cottages. The Vallances' house seemed to be the outpost of the village.

All this Sabine had taken in on her arrival that afternoon, still a little sad from her parting with Dillon who had gone to relations for the month that was to decide so much for her darling. Rebellious to the bitter end, she nourished in her faithful heart the hope that it might "prove a lesson," this departure from all precedent. A Fane "in service?" Ridiculous!

Unknown to the girl, Dillon had smuggled into Sabine's modest trunk an evening dress barely worn and destined for half-mourning; a delicate amethyst-coloured affair with luxury in every fold, the creation of a Paris house. It might revive memories. A tear had fallen on to the chiffon and Dilly, scolding, had turned to her iron.



Sabine smiled tenderly when the tissue paper disclosed this relic of her past magnificence, aware of the old servant's intention. It was a bribe to her youth. She had brought only her simplest clothes, the practical side of her character outweighing her imagination. She was here to work, not to play. And since success — the success she craved — depended upon her fulfilling very ordinary duties she must look the part and nothing more. She had sent to the bank her dressing-case with its elaborate fittings — aware of the surprised comments they might arouse among the servants — reserving only the tortoise-shell clock. Miss Vallance would understand, but below stairs they would have less mercy.

She glanced now at her father's portrait, at the keen face so full of life, the hair silvered at the temples and the eyes that few women could resist, so defiantly young despite the lines that threatened the half-smiling mouth. He seemed amused at the sight of his daughter in her present strange surroundings, as though he entered into the joke with the zest of his old speculations.

"You'll back me, won't you, dad?" Sabine whispered. It seemed to her, in the dim light that her father nodded. He was more comforting than Dillon.

She moved across to the open window and leaned out. It was dark, though the night held the charm of starlight, deceptively luminous in the absence of the moon. The cool air drifted in with its mixed odours; the fresh sting of wet seaweed that pierced the sweeter fragrance of stocks and tobacco plants arising from the garden beneath.

A bunch of the former, purple and red, with some tender sprigs of mignonette stood in a bowl on the table that held her discarded supper tray. The kindly thought had touched the girl. She could picture Miss Vallance arranging them with her delicate blue-veined hands in this piece of ancient china, beautiful in itself with its balanced oriental pattern. Everything in the quiet house, despite its obvious shabbiness, testified to a refinement in taste that had become a habit and to a sombre, proud old age



that appealed to Sabine peculiarly after her life mainly spent in garish hotels and furnished villas.

The place was a "home" in its truest sense, the very chairs linked to their owners by constant use and holding the same secrets and reservations, the same wistful memories and subtle defiance of laws of change.

Around this, Sabine's thoughts revolved happily, with a sense of adventure, of exploring a country hitherto glimpsed through the medium of books. The low, white house near Bideford had been a step in the right direction; that English existence for which she felt so strong a leaning. But, even there, the old sense of impermanence, of a halt in the course of a wandering life, had denied to her the full vision. At Liddingcombe, through the accident of her changed fortunes, she had stepped, not forward into a new world rendered more feverish and uncertain by the very fact of war, but backward, deliberately, into the past, the true picture of her dreams. It seemed well-nigh impossible in this still and peaceful house to conceive of whole nations engaged in battle or of any factor which could upset customs so rooted in tradition.

Yet, even here, she supposed, youth was taking up the burden of individual sacrifice, conscious of the call to arms; the landmen to the colours, the fisherfolk to patrol the seas.

The thought, unbidden, flashed across her that the master of the house was indubitably one of those whom England had a right to claim. She judged him to be close on thirty, strong, active and unmarried. Why had he not volunteered?

She frowned as she knelt on the window-seat, the breeze stirring her ruffled hair. The problem increased her dislike of Mark. She divined in him the typical improvident autocrat, proud of his birth and contemptuous of the opinions of those around him, even in the choice of his dress; poor, yet lacking the energy to work and retrieve his broken fortunes, tyrannical but subservient to the aunt who supported him. An idler, in fact — her lips curled. Lady Gull had been right there.

Miss Vallance she could admire, was prepared to like whole-



heartedly, but Mark? She shrugged her fine shoulders and laughed outright at the memory of those words which had floated out to her, anent her youth, from the upper windows. She would show him, without a mistake, that she did not require his admiration.

But how absurd to let it rankle! She gave herself a little shake.

"I don't really. It's not that. It's his manner that I can't stand, his insufferable air of patronage and his mockery. He hasn't the grace to abdicate but sees himself still heir to the kingdom — having sold his rights for a mess of pottage!"

She stared out into the night, calmed by her little outburst. How still it was! She could hear a faint thud from the stables as the grey pony moved in his stall. "Pepper" — she recalled the name, elicited from the little groom who had driven her from the station. He had shown himself impervious to the lure of conversation save on this single point. It was obvious that the dignity of his sudden rise from stable-boy — due to the fact that his superior had lately joined the forces — weighed heavily upon him. Groom to the Vallances. He would have sneered at a royal equerry! Sabine, inwardly amused, had watched his small figure stiffen when they turned into the village out of the winding road by the river, his whip cocked at the right angle, Pepper encouraged to "trot out." Unluckily the dash of their progress had been marred by an interruption. As they passed the *Hunted Stag*, a small inn that faced the beach, a woman had run out breathlessly, hailing the driver, with a message.

"Will yu tell Mr. Mark as sune as yu'm home that Sam's been tuk' bad again. Don't yu go forgettin', Steve!"

The youth had nodded haughtily and whipped up the grey pony.

The woman's troubled eyes had turned for a brief moment to the stranger. She had dropped a curtsy, to Sabine's delight — a new experience for her. It would soon be all over the village that the Vallances had a visitor (the trunk testified to this) and that Steve had fetched her from the station — with the corollary



that that boy was getting "tu big for his buits!" This from the gardener's wife whose own son had coveted the post left vacant by the soldier. Sabine divined but little of this, though she now recalled the woman's "dip." It was due, she knew, to the livery of the Vallances rather than to her own appearance.

"I don't suppose they'd carry it so far as to include me if they knew I was the housekeeper! I wonder how I shall stand with them? It's a funny sort of position."

She puzzled over it for a moment, her chin cupped in her hands, drinking in the scented air. There were owls at work in the hazel grove. She could hear their low mournful note and once the shrill startled cry of a smaller bird alive to danger.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. Bedtime. She would have to be up early in the morning, the family breakfast at half-past eight. So, closing the windows regretfully, she lit a candle and made her way along the passage to the bath-room which stood in the main block opposite Miss Vallance's room. As an after-thought she turned back, picked up her supper-tray and placed it on the housemaid's shelf at the head of the back stairs.

"They shall see that I'm independent. If they think that I'm a fine lady I shall get no work done." She had not missed the housemaid's manner, nor the glance she had cast at the littered room in the process of unpacking. It said as plainly as it could, "Another person to wait upon!" The sequel had been that no hot water had been vouchsafed to Sabine that evening.

Reaching the bath-room noiselessly, she filled a can and was preparing to steal back unobserved when she heard the sound of solid footsteps steadily mounting the front stairs. She did not want to meet Mark and drew back behind the door. But she peeped out through the crack to make sure of his departure. An oil lamp hung by a chain from the ceiling on the square landing and cast a narrow circle of light. As he came underneath she could see his face. It startled her. He looked so young, so superbly alive and yet so sad. Gone was his arrogant expression with the mockery in his blue eyes. There remained an utter hopelessness, the burden of some haunting care.



Instead of turning to the right he halted outside his aunt's door and tapped gently with his knuckles.

"It's Mark." His voice was low yet distinct. "Are you ready, old lady? Or is it too early to tuck you up?"

"One minute!" — Sabine caught the reply — "I'm coming, dear. Don't go!" Then the sound of the key being turned and the door was opened. On the threshold, in a faded, blue dressing-gown, her silvery hair drawn back from her face and gathered into a cotton net, Miss Vallance stood, fragile and sweet, the picture of age and welcoming love.

Mark put his arm around her.

"I'm a bit early, but Dinah needs me. I promised them I'd go back. They can't manage Sam alone. Poor old chap! He's bad this time. If only he'd keep off the drink, but it's difficult in his position. I've been expecting something like this ever since the boy joined up."

"Ah!" Miss Vallance moved back. The light had died out of her face. "A case of sin begetting sin." She spoke with an almost vindictive harshness.

Sabine wondered at the change, and at what lay behind the speech. She could hear Mark soothing her.

"You're not to worry. He'll be all right. I wouldn't have told you to-night, but I mayn't be home till after breakfast and so —"

The door closed behind him, cutting off the conversation.

Wide-eyed, Sabine sped down the passage to her room. This was the second time, she thought, that she had unwittingly been placed in the awkward position of eavesdropper. She drew a deep breath of relief when she found herself in her own quarters, the friendly lamp on the table, her father's face illumined by it. For she sensed some mystery in the house. What was the link that bound this man in the full tide of his youthful strength to that frail but, at times, severe old lady? And why did he wear that hopeless look?

"Anyhow, he's good to her," she decided rather grudgingly, "and he seems to 'lord it' in the village to some purpose when



there's trouble." She smiled as she let down her hair and began to brush it vigorously. "But he won't find he can master me."

Little she guessed what lay before her.

For the next fortnight Sabine found no leisure for imagination. Miss Vallance put her on her mettle. Kind but thorough to a degree that dwarfed all Sabine's own ideas, she opened up to the young girl secrets of thrift unknown to her; strange old family recipes for making polishes and pickles, at half the price that the grocer charged, for curing tongues and bottling fruits and other lore of the country. Even liniments and ointments came into the category.

Sabine blushed, remembering her little boast of "foreign dishes." It seemed that she did not even know the rudiments of English knowledge! But she took quickly to the dairy and loved it, so spotless and so cool, with its great pans where the cream gathered to be scalded or turned into golden butter. Here were modern innovations, saving labour, at which Miss Vallance was inclined to sniff a little. Mark, it seemed, had insisted upon them.

The whole house moved by rules. There were days for stores and days for linen and a system of lists that worried Sabine, written memos for the tradesmen and even a daily one for the gardener with the vegetables that the cook required. But on one point the girl scored. She won the confidence of the servants, always suspicious of a class that holds a midway position between employer and employed. Her very mistakes made them generous. For she was liable to correction like themselves, and although Miss Vallance was both loved and respected she was also undoubtedly feared. That layer of hardness underlying her gracious manner which Sabine had glimpsed and a certain touch of tyranny, the result of centuries of ruling, accepted by the villagers as lawful to one of "the family," forbade direct sympathy. It drew them unconsciously to Sabine. For the girl, though just, was merciful.

"Best go to Miss Fane first. She'll explain to the old lady," became a phrase in constant use. They welcomed what they had hitherto grudged, a capable intermediary.



The fact smoothed her thorny path. Not that she troubled overmuch. She had her father's ardent spirit, the same sort of careless courage that rose at the sight of an obstacle, and was undaunted by a fall. And here she had a goal in sight rendered, as the days passed on, more desirable by the fact that Mark, a silent, background figure watched, with his faintly mocking smile.

She had never forgotten his cynical speech: "You'll find out how much they'll stand!" She would have died at her post sooner than admit defeat.

In the end she had her reward. It came in an unexpected manner. Miss Vallance had been flagging. It was obvious that she was not strong, despite her energetic spirit, and the duties of instruction had tried her more than the pupil. On this particular afternoon for the first time she had given in, admitting that she had a headache and was going to lie down until after tea.

One of the rules of the house was to admit visitors at any hour if the owners were in. The white lie of "not at home" was anathema to the little old lady. She had, too, a rooted objection to any reference to her health. This Sabine had remarked. It made the chance of seclusion always a doubtful one. People came up from the village on the barest pretence for aid or advice and — this irritated Sabine — stayed to tea in the kitchen if not to a more solid meal. What was the use of economy on the part of the Vallances if they kept open house in this fashion? She disliked their being imposed upon and judged it shrewdly to be the case. She went so far as to hint at it and found herself, slightly bruised, recoiling from the wall of Tradition.

It was, it seemed, an inherited custom, a survival of the "bread and salt" that bound a man to loyal service in the old feudal days; still more than that, an integral part of the family pride. It should not be said that any just claimant went empty-handed from the door.

Sabine, intrigued but more modern, privately looked on it as folly. She scored it up against Mark and his lazy autocracy.

Her devout prayer at the moment, therefore, was for no in-



terruption with the legend of an ailing child, or financial misfortunes laid to the score of "war-time." But on this inopportune afternoon Henrietta chose to call.

"On a matter of business," she explained and was shown into the drawing-room.

Sabine met the parlourmaid on her way to rouse Miss Vallance.

"What a pity! She's looking worn-out. Couldn't I see Miss Gull instead?"

"I should think so, miss. But if I was you I shouldn't mention Miss Vallance being poorly. She mightn't like it to get about." The maid had added the warning shrewdly. Sabine nodded.

"I understand. You needn't wait. I'll speak to Miss Gull and, if its unavoidable, I'll go myself to fetch Miss Vallance." She ran quickly downstairs.

Henrietta was sitting squarely on a straight-backed chair near the window. She looked aggressive and plainer than ever. The afternoon was hot and sultry. Bicycling through the dust had given her a dull flush that did not improve her sallow complexion. She still wore the lemon sport's coat, but had added tan shoes and stockings to enhance its colour value.

She looked up as Sabine entered, and stared, for once taken aback, full of a startled recognition.

"*You?*"

"Yes." Sabine explained. "I am housekeeper now to Miss Vallance." She did not attempt to shake hands but stood, a slim, dignified figure, gazing down at the other girl. "Could you give me any message? Miss Vallance is engaged."

"But the maid said she was *in?*" Henrietta leaned on the word.

"In the house," corrected Sabine. "Since it is a business affair, perhaps I could be of use?"

Henrietta showed her claws.

"My business is not with servants. It's a private matter and important."

Sabine, unmoved, made another suggestion.

"Would you care to see Mr. Vallance?"



"No." Henrietta scowled. "I'll wait." It was an ultimatum. Sabine glanced at the clock. The hands pointed to half past three.

"Very well." She went out.

She stood for a moment near the porch, battling with a sudden temptation. She knew that Mark avoided Miss Gull on every possible occasion. Still, he was fond of his aunt. He should share the rough as well as the smooth. She decided to lay the case before him.

She moved on down the passage that led to the north wing and the study that was sheltering him. She tapped. A voice said, "Come in."

She turned the handle and stood on the threshold. It was her first glimpse of his sanctum, a long room lined with books and but partly furnished, the further end carpetless with scrubbed boards, a carpenter's bench, and a lathe near a cupboard that bulged with fishing-tackle. Mark, in his shirt sleeves, was busy planing a strip of wood destined to mend a gate. He turned his head and his brows went up at the unexpected apparition.

"Yes?" His manner was abrupt.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," said Sabine, "but I don't know how to act. Miss Vallance is not at all well—" She stopped, surprised by the spasm of fear that crossed his face. He sprang up and strode towards her.

"I'll come."

She checked him.

"It's nothing serious — only a headache — she's lying down. That isn't the point at all." The colour that had ebbed from his face returned and he looked relieved. She went on steadily. "Miss Gull has called and she insists on seeing Miss Vallance. It seems a pity that she should be disturbed just now. I did not say that she was ill, only engaged, because —" She paused.

Mark nodded.

"Quite right." His eyes studied the girl before him gravely with a new expression.

"But I couldn't dislodge her," Sabine confessed. Her listener



gave a snort of impatience. "I suppose I must go and wake your aunt?"

"No." He looked round for his coat and unwillingly struggled into it. "You were quite right to come to me. I'll tackle the young woman myself." He hesitated. "Was she — civil?"

Sabine lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"She was true to type. That doesn't matter." She saw Mark's mouth tighten.

"I'm sorry." He looked her full in the face. "If you have any cause for complaint, on that score — from *anyone* — I hope you will inform me at once."

It was so unexpected that Sabine coloured.

"Oh, but I haven't," she said quickly. "I'm really very happy here." She stepped back into the passage but there a new thought struck her. "I forgot to say that I asked Miss Gull if she would like to see you, and —"

He broke in:

"She said 'No'?"

His old mocking smile had returned with the arrogant tilt of his head. Sabine drew in her horns.

"She preferred to see Miss Vallance." Once more the "respectful housekeeper," she spoke without the ghost of a smile.

Mark gave her a sharp glance.

"In diplomatic language — yes. Thank you, Miss Fane."

It was a dismissal.

Sabine retreated into the store-room, conveniently near. She heard him pass and made a grimace through the closed door.

"I hope Henrietta will be rude! I think she's in the mood for it." Her thoughts reverted to Mark's speech with its undercurrent of chivalry which had taken her by surprise. "It's part of his pose," she decided. "As housekeeper to the *Vallances* I must be treated with respect. It was purely impersonal."

But in this conclusion she wronged the man. Had she overheard the conversation later between aunt and nephew she might have modified her views. The old lady, at first inclined to resent Sabine's interference, found no partisan in Mark.



"I don't agree with you, Aunt Beth. She did it to spare you, a kindly impulse. And that little beast was rude to her — though she laughed it off." He changed the subject, conscious that he had said enough. Miss Vallance would think it over.

That evening as Sabine was writing a letter to Dillon, there came an interruption. Her employer appeared on the threshold.

"What a poor light! You must tell Johnson to give you one of the larger lamps. I hope you're comfortable here?" She glanced round the dim room and her eyes fell on Fane's portrait. "Your father?" Her voice was gentle.

"Yes." There was subtle pride in the word.

"A fine face. You must miss him." The old lady laid her hand gently on the girl's shoulder. "Good night, my dear, and thank you for your thoughtfulness this afternoon. It's a comfort to feel that I've some one here who can fill my place occasionally — some one who is dependable."

Sabine looked up, her dark eyes wistful, touched by the unexpected praise.

"I hope to be. If you'll give me time?"

To her surprise Miss Vallance stooped and kissed her cheek — a light caress.

"Certainly. If you care to stay."

In this simple and unforeseen fashion she put an end to the term of probation.



## CHAPTER V

**I**T was barely five o'clock but the day held promise of great heat as Sabine slipped through the hazel grove, rejoicing in a sense of adventure. Indeed, with her long rainproof coat buttoned up to the throat and a soft felt hat drawn over her eyes she looked a hardened conspirator.

A bramble caught the flap of the former and dragged it back, revealing a glimpse of her dark blue bathing-dress and the fringe of a bath towel wound round her for better concealment and in lieu of orthodox petticoat. Beneath the hat her thick hair was tightly bound in an oilskin cap.

"For I mustn't get it wet and untidy," she had decided in her room when, awakening early, the daring project had first formed in her mind. "That would give the whole show away — though I can't see any harm in it. I can have a swim and get back before the household is astir."

She had found her way before to the little cove beyond thecombe that fringed the straggling hazel wood and she gave a childish skip of joy when she emerged from the shady path, damp and chilly with night dews.

Such a perfect, golden morning! The gorse ran down in yellow waves to the border of the low cliff where an old horse, a pensioner of the Vallances, was steadily cropping the wiry tufts in the outstanding patches of grass. Traces showed of rich red soil and beyond this was the blue-green sea with its black rocks where the laver clung adding to the vivid colour.

Sabine thought of the Mediterranean and smiled, a little scornfully, recalling the arid note of the land enclosing the tideless waters; the palm trees yellowing, and the dusty green of the



olives, only redeemed by the magical light. The South could not compare, she decided, with the beauty of her own country freshly washed by the rain in the full glory of the summer.

Hawks were wheeling in the sky and beyond them flashed silver wings as the gulls rose and swooped again; somewhere, unseen, a lark was singing. A rabbit frisked into his burrow, startled by the girl's light step, and the old horse turned and stared with a faint whinny at her approach.

She crossed the combe and made her way down the ragged gap where the cliff had crumbled to find herself on a pebbly beach with a strip of golden sand for fringe. To her right was the long spur of land that formed one horn of the crescent in which the fishing village slept. At the point the waves lapped the cliff and broke against the jagged rocks in little bursts of dazzling spray. She stood drinking in the picture.

But not for long; the sea called her. Slipping off her shoes and stockings she hid them with her other clothes behind a convenient boulder and ran forward over the sand. The water, as she plunged in, seemed icy for the first moment, for the sun was not strong enough yet to warm it. But very soon she forgot this in the perfect joy of swimming. It was her favourite exercise and one in which she excelled. At last she paused, out of breath, and paddled idly, her gaze turned shorewards, scanning the headland devoid of life and nett against the soft blue heavens.

Here she made a discovery. Near to the point at a little height from the water that washed the base of the cliff was a dark patch, semi-circular, like the entrance to a tunnel.

A cave? The possibility stirred a youthful desire to explore it. Taking a course parallel with the headland she soon came abreast and, cautious of sunken rocks, sounding the depth from time to time, approached the shore. Suddenly she found support for her feet; a stony ledge that sloped upwards. She pressed forward eagerly, drawing herself out of the water, and stood beneath the opening, knee deep in the breaking surf, that frothed, creamy, against the rocks.

The cliff, worn by winter storms, was full of little holes and



crannies affording an uncertain foothold. She swarmed up, wincing a little at the sharp grit which stung her soles but determined to see the adventure through. Now she could reach with her hands the edge of the wide opening. A minute later she knelt, breathless, on the floor of the cavern.

"Hurrah!" She scrambled to her feet, brushing the sand from her bare knees.

After the dazzling light without, her eyes failed to pierce the shadows, for the cave ran back for some distance. She moved forward, eagerly, blinking. The space widened, the roof higher. As her sight cleared she realised that the water must rarely penetrate save in abnormal tides. For the walls showed no signs of it, the floor strewn with fine dry sand and pebbles cast up by some winter storm. A cluster of sea-pinks overhung the entrance, deep-rooted in a cleft where the soil had filtered from above. The cave was the honoured guest of the land and not a troubled host of the waves.

At last she reached the boundary where the roof shelved down to meet the floor and paused, amazed. An old deck chair and a table made of wooden slats with a cast-off tarpaulin were propped against the sloping wall. In the angle beyond, a rough cupboard had been wedged, on rusty iron supports, at a height that would preserve it from any rare inundation. Underneath was a solid locker suggestive of a ship's cabin.

Robinson Crusoe with a vengeance! Here was a *cache* worth finding — especially in the owner's absence. Sabine stood there, puzzling it out. The only approach was from the sea and she doubted if a boat could attempt it, the rocky ledge an obstacle. Therefore the proud possessor must swim. It added to the mystery. Could it be a haunt of Mark's? It did not fit in with her conception of the man's character. It suggested a strain of boyish romance. She felt quite sure that "Crusoe" was young.

She shivered, suddenly aware of her wet and clinging bathing-dress. Yet she felt reluctant to leave the place. She was tempted to peep inside the cupboard. A scruple kept her wavering but feminine curiosity won.



"It can't hurt," she decided, "if it held any secrets the owner would lock it."

She stood on tiptoe but failed to reach the primitive fastening. Undaunted, she dragged out the locker from underneath and mounted upon it.

"Now!" She tugged at the knob.

The door suddenly flew back, nearly upsetting the girl's balance. She peered in eagerly. *Beer!* How terribly prosaic.

A row of bottles and a mug stood on the lowest shelf with an ancient pipe and tobacco jar. On the one above, rolled up, was a shabby old coat in pilot cloth.

Some fisherman's haunt, she decided, with a slight feeling of disappointment. The next moment she changed her mind. For beside the bundle lay a blotter of faded leather, bulging with papers, a bottle of ink and a fountain pen. One scribbled sheet protruded.

Dare she? Guiltily, fully aware of trespassing, she drew it forth and studied the writing with which it was covered.

*Not Mark's!* The letters sloped backwards with sharp angles in a large irregular hand quite unlike her employer's neat and rounded caligraphy. A stray phrase caught her eye.

" . . . the relentless sea, that knows no law of justice nor mercy, bound alone by its tides and seasons, giving life unheedingly and taking its full toll of death."

Here was no simple fisherman's logic.

She thrust it back hastily with a sense of added mystery and was preparing to close the cupboard when a clear, unmistakable sound behind her sent a shiver down her spine. A voice, angry and explosive, had betrayed its owner with one sharp: "*Damn!*"

Sabine wheeled round, still clutching the swinging door. For a moment of amazed horror she saw, framed in the opening, the naked shoulders and chest of a man, topped by a wet, fair head with blue eyes that glowered at her; in the next, Mark had ducked from sight. There was only the empty stretch of water with the sea-pinks nodding over the arch.

Sabine, without consciousness of her descent from the locker,



found herself crouching on the sand in the dark corner, too startled to think, but instinctively aware of her skin-tight, single garment.

Reason slowly returned and with it a rising anger.

"How hateful!" She struck her hands together. "To be caught — like this — in the act of spying. That's the climax! It simply means giving him the whip-hand." She choked with intense mortification. Here was the ruin of all her plans, her studied air of aloofness. She cast a nervous glance seaward. "But he'd never come back. He couldn't — *like that!*"

It was evident that Mark reverted at this early hour in the morning to the primitive habits of his boyhood, disdaining the more conventional dress that had come into vogue with mixed bathing. To Sabine, accustomed to foreign life, it seemed still more indecorous.

"It's *just* like him!" She felt glad to cast the blame on the man, aware of her own predicament. "He wouldn't care who saw him. It's a part of his *droits de seigneur.*"

A new disquieting thought followed. How was she to get back? The servants came down at half-past six and meanwhile Mark cut off her retreat.

She stole to the mouth of the cave and peered forth nervously. Far away she could see the flash of an arm in the sunshine, and the blot of a fair head rising and falling with the swell. Mark was swimming for his life! He passed the smooth spit of land and turned to the shore. The next minute she saw him vanish behind some rocks — a scuttering, white figure. It was evident that he, too, was filled with panic. The fact consoled her.

But the consolation was fugitive. All the way home as she ran, breathless, with the salt glow tingling through her limbs, the radiant sunshine beating down joyfully on her disguise, depression veiled from her the sight of the yellow gorse; the song of the larks beat unheeded on her ears.

She would have to meet Mark at lunch and face him under Miss Vallance's eyes. How would he act? What would he say?

This single meal with the family had been a concession on the



part of the little old lady, conscious of the loneliness of the girl's position — a tribute to her gentle birth. Sabine had welcomed the innovation. It brought a relief from the round of work. She was fond of studying character and the Vallances were a quaint pair. It gave her, too, a mischievous chance of playing the part she had mapped out *vis-à-vis* to the nephew. More than once she had divined his impatience at her attitude; that manner outwardly "respectful" which hid a lurking sense of humour.

To Miss Vallance she talked frankly; to Mark she listened — nothing more. She drew a subtle distinction between them, too fine to attract the old lady's attention but not unrealized by the man. It made him, at certain moments, plainly nervous in his speech.

Now, through one foolish impulse, she had put herself hopelessly in the wrong. Why, oh why had she thought of the cave, above all, explored the cupboard? She writhed with shame at the memory all through the busy forenoon as she lifted lavender-scented sheets from the linen-press and replaced those freshly returned from the laundry, dated the eggs in their wooden stand, some still warm from the nest, scrutinized the scoured pans in the dairy and wrote those endless lists. The hours flew past all too swiftly and the gong rang, true to time, as she was hurriedly washing her hands.

She gave one glance at herself in the glass as she turned to the door, buttoning her cuffs. A high colour was in her cheeks. It added brilliancy to her eyes. Little tendrils of silky hair that had escaped from the smooth mass, slightly crushed by her bathing-cap, rioted on her low forehead. They gave an added touch of youth to her irregular charming face, the nose tip-tilted, brows too straight for any claim to classical beauty. Her mouth with its delicate curves, hinting at mischief yet sensitive, seemed abnormally red as she passed; for the exercise had quickened her blood.

The adjective that had risen unsought evoked a fugitive memory — a line treasured from some book. She ran downstairs, searching the author. Kipling! Her brow cleared. What had



he said? "When you find a variation from the normal, meet it in an *abnormal* way." Something like that, anyhow! It supplied the answer to her riddle.

"I shan't wait for Mark to strike. I shall open up the subject myself." She paused, her hand on the dining-room door knob. "It's the last thing that he'd expect!" In she went, her head high, determined to risk the disclosure.

Miss Vallance sat with her back to the window, her nephew facing her across the long, well-laid table with its fine old silver and bowls of flowers.

"I hope I'm not late?" was Sabine's excuse. She had already seen the old lady, but she bowed to Mark as she took her place. "Good morning!" Mark avoided her eyes and murmured the conventional greeting. "And *such* a lovely morning too." She turned to Miss Vallance confidingly. "I must tell you of my adventures."

Mark stirred in his chair. Miss Vallance, luckily, was in a tranquil, indulgent mood. She was beginning to realize the result of her strenuous training, with increasing confidence in her pupil. It meant more leisure for gardening and to-day she had pottered happily among her roses, gathering the fullest blooms for *potpourri*.

"Adventures?" She smiled at Sabine. "You've been so busy this morning I wonder you've had time for any."

"Ah, but I was up at five!" The girl laughed, refusing the wine that the maid offered. A part of her pride was to drink only water now. She never forgot her changed position, although in many little ways she was treated as a guest and especially at the midday meal. She waited until the maid had gone and then resumed her confession. "I was in the sea at half-past! I woke early and the water looked so tempting in the sunshine. There wasn't a single soul about — apparently." She dared the word. "So I slipped on a coat, crossed the combe to the little beach and plunged in. You don't mind?" Her voice was coaxing

"No — o." Miss Vallance was taken aback. "But wasn't the water very cold? And do you think it's quite safe, bathing



alone like that? Supposing you went out too far — or had cramp?" She gave a shiver. "I'm not sure I ought to allow it. What do *you* think, Mark?"

Sabine deliberately followed the glance, though it needed her full courage. Mark seemed to be engrossed in severing the meat from his cutlet. He answered the question evasively.

"I presume that Miss Fane can swim." His eyes were riveted on his plate.

"Oh, yes," said Sabine lightly. "I once won a silver cup. In a water-fête abroad."

"Indeed?" Miss Vallance looked relieved. "All the same I hope you'll be careful. There's a strong tide round the point. And how do you manage about dressing? Liddingcombe is too primitive to indulge in proper bathing machines."

Mark laid down his knife and fork. He looked straight across at his aunt.

"I will rig up a tent for Miss Fane. There's that old one in the loft. It will do quite well, with some new ropes."

Sabine could hardly believe her ears. It was said in a careless way, with his old air of patronage.

"He's scored," she thought angrily.

"That's a good idea." Miss Vallance approved. She added ingenuously, "Did you have a bathe yourself this morning?"

Mark nodded. Sabine, watchful underneath her dark lashes, saw the blood creep up his neck to the edge of his crisp hair. It was Mark's way of blushing. She felt a malicious satisfaction. She remembered that she had not acknowledged his suggestion on her behalf.

"It's kind of you," she said stiffly, "to think of a tent, but the beach is so near I can easily run down in my coat." She turned in Miss Vallance's direction. "In Italy my father and I always bathed like that. We had a villa one summer close to Viareggio. We used to meet D'Annunzio there." She wanted to change the conversation. His name served as a pivot. "I see he has written a wonderful poem stirring his countrymen to action. I wonder if Italy will come in?"



Miss Vallance's smile died away and from her lips, curt, vehement, came a startled:

"God forbid it!"

Sabine, puzzled, stared at her. Then she guessed her misconception.

"Of course, I mean on *our* side." She corrected her remark quickly. "It's a very difficult position for Italy, isn't it? But they've always hated Austria. I think it will come all right in the end."

"Right?" Miss Vallance seemed agitated. "How can right grow out of wrong, or any good be achieved by sin? This war is a crime towards God and man."

The listener's bewilderment increased.

"On the part of Germany?" she suggested, and was about to add more when Mark checked her, his voice icy:

"We never discuss the war, Miss Fane."

It was not a statement but an order. The colour mounted to her forehead. Rarely before in her life, even in the days of childhood, had she been spoken to like this. With an effort she controlled herself. But she looked at Mark scornfully, her lip curling. It said plainly:

"No, *you've* no right to — shirking at home!"

He stared back moodily, his thick, fair brows drawn together, the blue eyes coldly defiant. Then deliberately he began to talk to his aunt on local matters, excluding the girl from the conversation.

Miss Vallance poured out the coffee. Her hand was shaking. Fane's daughter, rigid in the high-backed chair, was fighting against open revolt.

Wild thoughts whirled through her brain. Was this the man's mean revenge? Or had she stumbled on the truth, hitherto veiled from her, that her employers were numbered among a class that she looked upon with horror, lost to all patriotism? She recalled now other occasions when some chance remark anent the war had been met by a vague silence. So busy had been the flying days that her own interest in the struggle had been overlaid



by the manifold needs of her new occupation. Only at night, after her supper in the seclusion of her room, had she found time to read the paper. This had retarded the revelation.

Miss Vallance rose from the table.

"I think I shall have a little rest before I start for the Malisons'. Are you going to drive me there, Mark?"

"Well — I could. You're not staying long?" He had a rooted objection to calls.

"No." She smiled, aware of his thought. "You needn't come in if you don't want to."

"All right." He stood up and opened the door for his aunt.

Sabine was following in her wake, but Mark checked her on the threshold.

"Miss Fane, may I have a word with you?"

She faced him, very still and proud.

"I'm at your service, Mr. Vallance."

He waited until the little old lady was mounting the stairs then closed the door.

"There's something I want to explain." He stood, looking down at Sabine from his great height, and squared his shoulders as though he foresaw an unpleasant task. "It's only fair to you," he added.

He could feel, beating back from her a steady wave of aggression, which was partly her dislike to himself and partly a more primitive instinct, the eternal warfare of the sexes.

Suddenly his lips twisted into a half smile.

"I suppose you think" — he paused for a moment searching the exact phrase — "that you've fallen headlong into a nest of Conscientious Objectors?"

"It seems so," said Sabine coolly.

"A natural conclusion." His voice was dry. "But the facts are not so simple as that. My aunt is a Quaker — you didn't know it?" He had seen Sabine's eyes widen. "She goes to church, so you might not have guessed. Somebody must." He shrugged his shoulders. "An example to the villagers. But her conduct is based on the Quaker's creed. This war has been a



severe shock. She looks on it as the devil's work — as a crime against humanity. To reason against this opinion is hopeless. Worse than that, it is so upsetting at her age and with her health, that my warning to you just now was" — he paused — "unavoidable."

"Yes?" The word was faintly amused.

Mark let the challenge pass. He went on steadily:

"My aunt has been through much trouble. I owe her everything in the world. I have fallen into line with her although I hold opposite views."

Sabine drew a breath of relief, unconscious of the action.

"That's *some* comfort," she said bluntly. "But it's difficult to realize." Her eyes narrowed on the words.

He guessed her thought and again she saw the hot flush beneath his skin, bronzed though it was by outdoor life. Suddenly his calm broke down.

"I *can't* go! Don't you understand?" It was almost as if he threatened her. "It's intolerable! But I've got to stick it." There was fierce despair in his voice.

For the first time she felt a touch of sympathy for the man. She had pierced his guard and found him human. The outburst had been unexpected. She met him now half-way.

"You *want* to fight?"

Mark smiled. He had himself in hand again.

"I was brought up to be a soldier." The quiet words carried weight. He turned abruptly and moved to the window. Staring out at the green lawn with its frame of flowers, so gay in the sunshine, he went on huskily, "I daren't risk it. It would kill her."

Sabine's face was very thoughtful. Pity was warring with distrust. And what a soldier he would make! Her eyes surveyed his muscular form, suggestive of power and endurance.

"I wonder if you're right," she queried. "All over England, now, there are women, both delicate and old, parting from those they love best — husbands, children, only sons. Your aunt —" She paused.



"Has been *more* than a parent." Mark spoke over his shoulder. "And there's something else that I can't tell you. It's her secret, not mine."

Sabine wondered. A silence followed.

Mark swung round suddenly.

"That's not the point." His voice was hard. "I'm not complaining — I've no right to. But I wanted you to understand. You're a great comfort to Aunt Beth. Her health's improving, she's taking rest. Are you going to stay?" He spoke abruptly.

Sabine looked down at her hands. The slim fingers were locked together. She wore her father's signet ring with his crest, her only ornament. She studied it for a moment, thinking of the dead man.

"Are you satisfied with me?" she asked. The question was as direct as his.

"Yes."

She knew it had cost him an effort, the measure of his love for Miss Vallance. She felt a grudging respect for him.

"Thank you. I see no reason why, if I'm competent, I should not stay." She moved back as she spoke with a curious desire to escape from the man's subtle domination, to be by herself and think clearly. She glanced at the clock pointedly. "Is that all? Will you excuse me?"

He gave her a shrewd glance. It ran over her youthful face and changed, its unconscious arrogance melting into something wistful, the silent appeal of a lonely soul. But all he said was:

"Certainly."

In a curious panic she retreated. She was baffled by her own sensations. On the threshold she looked back.

Mark had dismissed her from his mind. His eyes were fixed upon a portrait that hung in the alcove by the window. A flicker of red caught the light, the dull red of uniform, laced with gold, finely mellowed by the blurring hand of Time.

The smile had returned to his lips as he looked up at his ancestor but it held no shadow of amusement only the bitterness of defeat.



The girl shivered, running upstairs. She was caught anew by the mystery that seemed to haunt the old house.

"He could go if he liked. It's all nonsense!" she said to herself angrily. Yet the very vehemence of the speech betrayed the doubt in her heart.



## CHAPTER VI

ON a day when the fishing village was drenched by a cold rain that drove up from the sea on the wings of a storm that sent the waves grinding angrily on the beach, Dillon arrived at Liddingcombe.

But the Irishwoman was weather-proof. Not even the draughty carrier's conveyance that had brought her from the distant junction could dim her joy in the reunion, as Sabine kissed her wrinkled cheeks and duly admired the "new bonnet" and the tight black coat buttoned across the ample curves of her motherly bosom.

With the first warm clasp of her nurse's arms, the strain of the past weeks relaxed; Dillon supplied a safety-valve for the girl's pent-up perplexities. At last she could talk openly, sure of a loving sympathy that held no hint of patronage, but was vivified by imagination. "Dilly is sure to understand": the old cry of her childhood.

Sabine had found rooms for her in the main road fringing the sea, graced by the few and primitive shops supplying the local needs. Her parlour boasted a curved bay-window filled with those melancholy plants that seem indigenous to lodgings and take no toll of the seasons but continue imperceptibly to push forth broad spiked leaves of a dingy green, in need of sponging. Over this modest barricade Dillon could watch the passers-by and, veiled by the coarse net curtain, inhale the "life" of the village.

The tight-lipped, sombre woman who owned the house had parted from her husband a few weeks since, his dreams of rest after long years in the mercantile marine shattered by the urgent needs of war. He was now in charge of a trawler somewhere in



the North Sea. Her thoughts, brooding eternally on the dangers of those mine-swept waters, found relief in active work and she had welcomed the chance of a lodger.

Sabine had chosen wisely; the woman was no village gossip. This had been the girl's main care. Dillon, carefully primed by post, had promised caution in her speech. The photographs of her darling in all her ancient finery remained at the bottom of her trunk. There was to be no allusion to the luxury of their life abroad, nor to the status of the Fanes. Sabine's pride revolted from local curiosity. She did not wish to pose as one who — in village speech — had "come down in the world." She craved a respect that was wholly confined to success in her present post. Besides this, it was quite difficult enough to define the position in which she stood without further complications. For Miss Vallance was variable; at one moment gracious and friendly, at another the aloof employer.

Dillon, over the lengthy "tea," with its "Chudleighs" thick with clotted cream — a kindly attention from Miss Vallance to whom Sabine had confided the news of her nurse's visit — listened shrewdly to the recital and formed her own private conclusions. She guessed that Mark was the stumbling-block.

"And small wonder," she said to herself, watching the vivid, clear-skinned face that smiled above the "best" teapot. "She'd charm the heart out of anny man!"

This touch of romance awoke in her a wild new ambition for her charge. Providence had led Sabine straight into the Vallance household. Mark was clearly ordained for her as a way out of all her troubles. But she must move warily; above all in innocence. Dillon would be the last to stir the girl's slumbering suspicions.

She asked for details of Mark's appearance. Sabine, in the glow of meeting the confidante of many years, was generous in her description.

"And him fair — as it should be," Dillon privately decided.

The damning fact in Sabine's eyes of his evasion of active service held very little weight with her nurse. The tendency to



rebel against any form of "tyranny" — the expression was an elastic one — so common among her countrymen, and an inborn grudge towards England warped her sense of patriotism. Besides, who wanted a husband fighting? She approved his devotion to his aunt and even his "old-maidish ways." Properly domesticated, he would be easier to manage.

The scheme, gathering shape in her mind, was crowned by a sight of the man himself; an anxious moment, for Dillon believed firmly in first impressions.

They were sitting in the bay-window watching the turmoil of the sea through a gap in the row of cottages facing them and which permitted the retreat of the retired captain to boast the name of Sea View.

Dillon felt a touch on her knee as Sabine drew back quickly from the chance of being observed and whispered:

"There's Mr. Vallance — coming now! Don't let him see you watching him."

The nurse's grey eyes narrowed. She peered through the screen of aspidistras.

A tall figure in dingy oil-skins was striding down the muddy road, his rough boots disdaining puddles, his head thrown back on his broad shoulders. About him was an air of impatience and of unconscious ownership that overlooked the use of the pavement. The grocer's cart, lumbering up, drew aside for him to pass and he gave the man a curt salute. Dillon's glance sped quickly to the face of the youthful driver. There was a loyal eagerness in the way the boy acknowledged the greeting.

"He's *liked*," the old nurse suggested.

"Yes — that's the queer part of it." Sabine watched the retreating figure. "They'd do anything for him. He seems to take it as his right. Yet he only owns a slice of the village. Sir Joshua Gull is the Squire; both here and at Lidding St. Mary. He's a good landlord, and generous, but not in the least popular. Whereas the Vallances are loved."

"But they can love too," said Dillon, her eyes glued to the window. "It's not all on one side."



A child in an open doorway had run out at Mark's approach with a chuckling cry drowned by the wind that buffeted the tiny figure. Mark had halted, then crossed the pavement. They saw him swing the baby up out of the driving lash of the rain and the pair vanished into the cottage.

A minute later the man reappeared, laughing, a buxom woman behind him, her face still warm from some parting remark. Mark nodded and passed on, but the woman lingered, screened by the door, firmly grasped by a plump hand with an imbedded wedding-ring. There was devotion in the look she cast after the hurrying figure, oil-skins flapping against his gaiters.

Sabine met Dillon's eyes.

"Yes, he's good to them," she conceded.

"And fond of the childer," thought Dillon, her plans racing gaily ahead. But what was Sabine's attitude? Was her indifference assumed? She set a little trap for her.

"A grand-lookin' gintleman — if he didn't wear them owld clothes."

"Oh, clothes don't matter here," said Sabine. "Besides, *this* weather —" She shrugged her shoulders, conscious with a faint amusement that she was finding excuses for Mark.

"An' bein' what he is, he doesn't trouble," the old nurse supplemented. She changed the subject. "Miss Vallance, now, would she be taking it amiss if ye thanked her for me for the clotted crame?"

"No, I'll tell her you enjoyed it. She says you must come up some day and have tea with me in my room."

For this had been one of the "pleasant mornings" when the little old lady had unbent, watching Sabine arrange the flowers and ruining her crowning effort by introducing some maidenhair fern; a "touch of green" that Sabine avoided with its hothouse pretension which seemed to war with Nature's original design.

Dillon evaded the invitation. She preferred to remain in the background at present.

"We'll see, dearie. I'll be here when ye're wanting me and watching for ye. An' bring me down somethin' to work at — I



can't sit with me hands idle. Mending or a bit of washing? There's that length of grey satin we bought together at Woolland's sale. I'm thinkin' t'would make a fine blouse for you to wear in the cowl'd weather."

"Oh, Dilly, you old fraud!" Sabine hugged her tenderly. "You know quite well that I gave it to you."

"Indade an' ye didn't, Miss Sabine." The grey eyes were bright with love. "It's confused in your mind you are! 'Twas the brown rimnant with the stripes."

They proceeded to argue it out. Dillon remained unconvinced.

"And what should I do with a fine silk blouse in a God-forsaken country like this? Ye'll bring me down a good pattern. I could copy the mauve *crêpe de Chiny*." She clasped her worn hands together and her simple joy overflowed. "To feel that I'm back with you agin and that old Dilly's of some use!"

Before such tender eloquence, Sabine gave in. The memory was warm in her heart as she set forth through the driving rain, homeward bound, her long coat buttoned by "Dilly" up to her chin, clutching on to her umbrella. She was unconscious of following steps, for the gale was gathering in force and at the turning inland where the last white cottage gleamed in the dusk a snapping gust of wind rushed past, caught her umbrella from underneath and turned it completely inside out.

As she fought with it she became aware of a presence beside her. A strong hand grasped the stick and shouted a warning:

"Look out! Your hat's going next!"

Her hands, released, went up to her head and clutched the soft felt brim in time. Bewildered she saw that her helper was Mark. The blue eyes laughed down at her from under his dripping sou'wester.

"I'll put this ship-shape." He swung round, juggling with the outraged *en-tout-cas*. The wind, as though regretting its trick of a minute since, reversed the process; with a click the umbrella righted itself.

"But I think we'd better roll it up," Mark continued. "It's no good."



Sabine had recovered her wits, the hat-pins driven firmly home.

"Please. Thank you very much."

"The loop's torn off," Mark stated. Diving into a deep pocket, he produced some string. One end in his teeth, he rolled it round the fluttering folds. "There!" He tucked it under his arm.

"I'll take it," said Sabine quickly.

"No." He was obstinate.

They fell into step, side by side.

"I thought you were going up with the umbrella! I only just arrived in time." He seemed to be in a mischievous mood.

"Like a sausage balloon," suggested Sabine, "on the lookout for the German fleet." She regretted the words immediately. Why couldn't she have avoided the war?

He seemed to realize her discomfort, for he ignored the awkward subject.

"You oughtn't to be out this weather. We rarely get such a gale, even in the winter months. I suppose you started before it grew bad?"

She explained the important reason. Mark listened, his head bent to catch the words, walking close to the girl in order to shield her as much as he could.

"I've an old nurse too," he said. "She lives up at Lidding St. Mary — a dear soul but very deaf. When I'm in trouble I fly to her." His mouth took a whimsical curve. "But it's difficult to be confidential when one has to shout at the top of one's voice. Like I'm doing now!" He laughed outright. For the wind made havoc of his speech. "There's the wall! Now, you'll get some shelter."

Sabine nodded, out of breath. In the lee of the stones she glanced at Mark. She had never seen him before in this mood, at once boyish and reassuring.

"He's really kind," she said to herself. "He needn't have caught me up at all. Or just passed and raised his hat." And she thought of the scene in the narrow street, Mark with the tiny child in his arms.



He was aware of her scrutiny and met it with a slow smile. He seemed to come to some decision that touched his own sense of humour and he broke the silence that threatened them.

"I've been longing for ages to ask you something. Had you met Vox before, or was that the first introduction? I mean on the day you came to explore."

The unexpected question amused her.

"No. I'll be honest." She related the history of the thorn and the spaniel's gratitude. Somewhat childishly, she added, "But don't give the secret away."

"Not I," said her companion. "If there's one thing I hate, it's an anti-climax. But I had a glimpse of the truth. Vox is not troubled by politeness in his attitude to strangers."

"Why 'Vox'?" She had often wondered.

"Because he's a power in the land. Ignored, sneered at when quiescent, but attended to when he *shouts*! His other name is *populi*." She laughed. He went on happily, "I'll admit it's far-fetched, but we'd had three generations of 'Dans' and I couldn't think of anything better. It humbled him too. He was inclined to look down on his surroundings — to assume what our friend Miss Gull condemns as a true 'Lidding St. Mary air.' You see he was born in the old kennels."

There was faint satire in the speech. The girl felt taken aback. So he knew what people said of him?

"Perhaps he has tried to bite the lady?" She threw it out carelessly.

"Not only *tried*." Mark chuckled. He held back the door in the wall.

She glanced at him, as she passed through, over her shoulder, the action free from any thought of coquetry, but undeniably attractive.

"I'm glad," she whispered, her eyes dancing, "I don't think I care for '*Enrietta*.'"

"No?" His thick fair brows went up in assumed surprise. "But that's rank heresy! She's such an *improving* young lady."

Sabine's face, mischievous, with its bright colour and wind-



blown hair was good to look upon, he thought. He had realized that she was pretty, somewhat grudgingly, from the start, but this was the first occasion in which her charm — the charm of the Fanes that was due to no glamour of regular lines but arose from personality, elusive yet deepening on acquaintance — took full hold of the man. It stirred him unaccountably. He turned and carefully fastened the door; a simple affair, yet he lingered.

The wind in the gully formed by the lawn sent the girl hurrying forward to the kindly shelter of the porch. Once inside she shed her coat and mindful of the polished stairs, stooped to pull off her galoshes. They resisted her efforts, sticky with mud.

"You'll dirty your hands." Mark was behind her. "Let me do it." Bending down, he cut short her protestations, his muscular fingers, slender but strong, gripping the wet rubber.

At that moment the drawing-room door opened to disclose Miss Vallance. She stood there, surveying the pair, very erect, in silent surprise.

Sabine, aware of disapproval, felt suddenly guilty, for no cause: the absurd guilt of the innocent.

"The carpets —" She spoke incoherently, out of sheer nervousness.

Miss Vallance made no response.

Snatching up the galoshes, Sabine beat a hasty retreat. She was furiously angry with herself. Why hadn't she taken the matter calmly? As calmly as Mark, whom she hadn't thanked and whose voice followed her up the staircase.

"I'll keep your umbrella, Miss Fane. I fancy that the catch is loose but it only needs a little attention."

She leaned over the banisters.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Vallance, but please don't trouble. It's not worth it."

"It's a very good umbrella," said Mark. "You leave it to me. I'll put it right."

She realized gratefully that he was covering her retreat. For the quiet, well-bred voice went on, this time addressing the aunt:

"It turned inside out — at the gate. Luckily I came up in



time. You can hardly stand against this gale. Well, how are you, old lady? It's bad weather for your neuralgia."

Sabine, thoughtful, reached her room.

"'At the gate?'" She repeated the words; then stared at herself in the glass, aghast.

Her felt hat was tipped sideways and a glossy coil of dark hair hung in a loop on her soaked shoulder whilst about her face the wild curls, stirred by raindrops, rioted. Her eyes were brilliant, her cheeks flushed. She looked like some schoolgirl playing truant, after a mad romp through the woods.

She did not realize that the effect had held for Mark the charm of a picture, as free and unconcerned as Nature. She saw herself in Miss Vallance's eyes, dishevelled, Mark's hand upon her ankle, a little uncertain of her balance, clutching the sleeve of his slippery coat. Her annoyance found vent in a single word as she pitched the soaked hat on the floor.

But this childish act of temper stirred humour from its hiding-place. She sank down in the wicker chair and gave herself up to helpless mirth. The worn seat creaked beneath her and the frilled chintz, with its faded pattern, added a rustle of disapproval. She laughed and laughed until she cried.

For her visit to Dillon had aroused vivid memories of the past. The present seemed some fantastic dream, suggesting private theatricals where she posed and fluttered with grey side-curls — an immaculate dowager.

"The 'respectable housekeeper'!" she sobbed, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I don't wonder at her face. And caught — in the act — with the cherished nephew!"

Later, more sober thoughts followed, with a memory of the man's tact and his kindness on their walk home. Had she misjudged Mark? She went back over the old ground. Even to that speech of his overheard by accident and the encounter in the cave.

Above all things she revered fair play and now, probing the facts, she admitted that her own attitude had served to emphasize the gulf between them. Mark was not a man to snub. He had



the faults of strength, not weakness, and Sabine was forced to admit the truth: there were fine points in his character. He was tender to all creatures in trouble. His unselfish behaviour to his aunt and his patience were unusual. If he had stooped to a mean revenge he could have taken his due to-night. Instead of which — “At the gate.” The little phrase haunted her.

It had cleared the victim from suspicion in the shrewd old lady's mind. Sabine had not waylaid Mark; their meeting had been accidental. And the girl understood men. They disdained trifling with the truth in small matters. Yet Mark had stooped to a deliberate misstatement. It humbled her, yet unconsciously was flattering to her youthful pride. Many a woman has been won by a lie born of chivalry.



## CHAPTER VII

**L**OOKING back in later years, it seemed to Sabine incredible how swiftly after this occurrence they were swept forward into friendship — and out beyond to perilous country where Dillon, no longer the eager accomplice, strove in vain to check their madness. There was something pathetic in the fact that the loving old woman had been the first to believe in the “hand of Providence” as the directing factor, scenting romance where none existed, so deeply imbued was she with her nursling’s unfailing charm.

On the morning after the gale, Sabine had risen to her work reassured. She wisely concluded that Miss Vallance would not refer to the scene overnight. It involved Mark and her family pride. But she showed her displeasure in other ways.

For a week she was the “aloof employer” and, what was more exasperating, she watched the pair covertly. Sabine grew to dread the sound of the gong summoning her to lunch. Mark, alive to the situation, was restive, then obstinate. He would draw the girl, against her will, into the current conversation and refer to her judgment in indoor matters with a man’s obtuse disdain for the secret ways of the opposite sex. He knew that Sabine was being punished. This injustice on the part of his aunt nettled him and, although he maintained a studied air of indifference, he turned aside many shafts intended for the young girl, under a cloak of “household directions” which hinted at her incompetence.

Sabine, comforted by Dillon, kept a straight course between them, deferential to Miss Vallance, cool though courteous to the nephew. But Youth, that is ever the strongest link in the pres-



ence of crabbed Age, tripped her up at odd moments. Impossible to avoid a quick, answering twinkle of eyes when Mark after a dressing-down observed that the wind was in the east! Johnson, handing the potatoes, felt the current that passed between them and smiled as she left the room. "Mr. Mark" was "waking up!"

On the following day the storm broke.

Miss Vallance rose in a certain mood which was well-known to her retainers. They summed it up as "pernickety-mad." The larger share of her displeasure fell upon Sabine's shoulders as the little old lady peered and poked into every corner of the house searching causes for complaint. But Mark came under the ban too. Sabine, wrestling with the stores, could hear the shrill, aggrieved old voice, disputing some point, in her nephew's sanctum. Portions of the conversation drifted across as Sabine, perched on the low steps — Mark's handiwork — searched, in vain, an upper shelf for some phantom pots of currant jelly.

"I can't help it, Aunt Beth. You *must* put up with present conditions, the scarcity of labour and so forth. . . . Leave Griggs? But that's absurd! The man's doing all he can — he has promised me the first chance. He's up to his eyes in work and both his sons have enlisted. *What?* . . . Now, look here, old lady, we won't go into all that." There was infinite weariness in his voice. The listener felt sympathetic.

There came an ominous crash from the kitchen. Sabine flew to investigate the fresh disaster and found the cook piecing together a *casserole* that had "slipped" from her hands, very aggressive, with: "Accidents will happen, miss, I'm sure I'm as careful as I can be," pat on her tongue at the girl's approach.

The nerves of the household were on edge. It needed all Sabine's tact to prevent Johnson from giving notice. Miss Vallance had "remarked on" the silver.

As she left the pantry, tired but relieved, she heard the former say to the housemaid:

"Working up for a fresh attack. You mark my words, one of these days she'll go off sudden in her tantrums — like the snuff of a candle. That's *religion!*"



Sabine wondered — with a smile at the illogical conclusion.

The gong rang out under Johnson's hand like a challenge to battle. Miss Vallance appeared, dark rings round her eyes, tight-lipped, her face grey. She sat down at the head of the table, picked up a fork, scrutinized it and straightened the glasses provokingly. Mark watched under set brows. Johnson handed the vegetables with a rigid arm, her head averted.

Miss Vallance played with her food. The suggestion, from her nephew, of an alternative in the shape of a "nice poached egg" was met with scorn. Once he glanced sideways at Sabine as though imploring her assistance. The girl made some nervous remark anent her employer's appetite and was promptly snubbed by the latter. Then Mark blundered badly:

"You're worn-out! Why *can't* you rest?"

"Rest?" said Miss Vallance. She proceeded to point out succinctly that this was her nephew's prerogative.

The man's temper gave way under the strain of her aggression.

"You're quite right. I'm not wanted here. My proper place is at the Front."

A startled gasp escaped Miss Vallance. She rose and pointed to the door. There was infinite dignity in the gesture. It was backed by the full force of her spirit. Mark went out without a word, his face stony, shoulders squared.

But it had the effect of a victory. There was something menacing in his silence; his quiet, male determination to avoid a scene with a woman.

Sabine, deeply uncomfortable, applauded his action in her heart.

"I'm glad he didn't apologize," she said to herself rebelliously. "Good old Mark! She *is* a tyrant." But her eyes were glued to her plate; she dreaded the other's intuition.

The meal was concluded without remark. Johnson appeared with the coffee and whisked off the unwanted cup. As she passed Sabine her lips twitched and the girl guessed her intention. Mark would have his, hot, from the kitchen. All the servants worshipped him.



At last it was over. Sabine rose, with a sense of reprieve. She glanced furtively at Miss Vallance and was startled by her deathly pallor.

"You're not well?" She moved forward obeying her humane impulse. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

"No, thanks," said Miss Vallance coldly. "I'm *quite* well." She stood erect yet pathetic, grasping the back of her chair; then, with an effort, moved across to the fire and warmed her thin old hands. "This sharp weather doesn't suit me." With an air of dismissal she concluded, "It's your afternoon out, I believe."

The crude reminder checked Sabine and swept away her generous pity.

"Yes, it's Thursday." Thankfully, she went upstairs to her room.

She had planned to go for a brisk walk, returning later for tea with Dillon, of whom she had only caught brief glimpses on her errands to the village. This was to be an "occasion" and to please the fond old woman she would take especial pains with her toilet. As she rearranged her hair she decided that the new life was broadening her sympathies. It was a refreshment to body and soul to cast off her severe clothing and hunt for a pretty blouse. She could understand the relief of a servant who sheds all hint of "uniform" and becomes a distinct personality divorced from her occupation once the area steps are passed. She smiled at herself in the mirror, enjoying her preparations.

It was a crisp autumn day following on a hard frost, sunny and bright, ideal weather for the young and energetic.

"An afternoon for light furs," Sabine decided. She rejected a serviceable skunk tie, remembering a certain collar of tail-less ermine and a soft cap of the same, toned down by a black wing.

"It's deceptively simple — like most good things. And the villagers will think it's rabbit!" She settled it firmly on her head and drew out a dark curl. "*Now*, Dilly won't scold me."

She brushed her serge coat and skirt and ran eagerly down to the hall, rejoicing in a sense of freedom. There she encountered Miss Vallance who looked her over from head to foot and averted



her eyes indifferently. Sabine was passing her when she heard an exclamation:

"How annoying! This hasn't gone, though Mark promised —" Miss Vallance broke off, biting her lip, her eyes on a letter propped against the card-tray.

Sabine paused.

"Can I leave it?" She saw that the letter was addressed to *Mrs. Cathcart, Dene Place*. "I can easily go that way."

Miss Vallance hesitated. She was not in the mood to solicit a favour.

"You're sure?"

"Quite. I've nothing to do and I want a good walk. I know the road."

"Then, if you would be so kind?" Miss Vallance relaxed slightly. "It's important, as I want an answer."

Sabine gathered up the letter.

"Would you like it early, or will it do this evening on my return? I'm going to tea with my old nurse."

"That will do perfectly. Thank you." Miss Vallance smiled — a frosty smile — and, as one who makes supreme amends but fully aware of condescension, she added, "What a pretty hat!"

Sabine was inwardly amused.

"It has seen good service." Her tone was light.

"That's the best of ermine," said Miss Vallance. She was not deceived as to its value. "Though it gets soiled so quickly. I can give you a good old recipe for cleaning it, if you'll remind me."

Sabine accepted the olive branch. She wondered what had become of Mark. His stick and cap had gone from the stand.

Her thoughts turned again to the letter as she made her way across the fields, the turf crackling beneath her shoes, the furrows of ploughed soil beyond silver-edged above the deep rusty-red of the earth. Black-hooded crows were stalking with their clumsy gait between the ridges or flopping down with a hoarse cry; here and there a party of gulls followed the land birds' example, hungry from indifferent fishing.



She scanned the address on the note.

"Cathcart?" She repeated the name with the memory of a winter in Rome and some pleasant neighbours in the flat beneath the one that the Fanes had taken. They had met at the house of a mutual friend and formed one of those swift and passing acquaintanceships which gather warmth from propinquity in a foreign land and end in a dwindling series of letters. "I know they lived in the West country. How odd if it should be the same! I should like to see Babs again."

She referred to Mrs. Cathcart's daughter, her own junior by some years and an ardent admirer of Sabine's, a pretty girl with a boy's deep voice and chestnut hair that was always wild.

"She *was* a pickle!" Sabine smiled, recalling an escapade in which Tommy, the girl's young brother, had brought down upon their heads the voluble wrath of the civic guard. Sabine's fluent Italian, aided by a generous tip, had saved the pair from dire results.

She dived down into narrow lanes where the leaves lay thick upon the ground and the high banks showed vivid patches of blackberry trails like tongues of flame. For the voluptuous colour-scheme of Autumn had cast its spell on the land.

Screened from the force of the wind, she dawdled, finding fresh treasures in the hedge at every step; hart's-tongue and polipoddy ferns, tasselled and heavy with yellow seed, and along the protruding roots of trees the vivid green of moss and ivy. Lichen with tiny scarlet cups held dew for the fairies to sip, and she rescued one of their straying steeds, a stag-horned beetle dulled by the cold, obstinate in a rut of the road. Everywhere were bright-hued berries; the hard knobs of the briar or those, glistening, of the maple, its leaves aglow, with, for a neighbour, the elder, wearily weighed down with its blue-black fruit like a widow's weeds. At last she came to the rose-wreathed lodge guarding the entrance to Dene Place. It was wedged into a high wood, facing south, so well protected that a cluster of blooms still lingered, full blown and steeped with moisture, swaying above a latticed window.



She walked slowly down the drive, the undergrowth deep on both sides, with the tang of burning wood in her nostrils from a distant bonfire, sharp, delicious. It, too, suggested autumn and breathed of gipsy wanderings that quickened the girl's imagination. Strange places always moved her, with their hint of mystery, and when she came suddenly into a clearing and saw ahead a square white house, not beautiful, but suggesting solid comfort, she felt a sense of being cheated out of the castle of her dreams.

"But it's very British," she decided. "It's like a bluff old country squire, too sure of his position to stoop to any modern pretension. His pride lies in the thick walls — and his heart in the stables!"

A huge scraper, obviously used, and steps freely marked by footprints suggested other visitors. Inside the hall, as she was admitted, she noticed some military coats flung in a heap on an oak settle with various feminine wraps and furs.

She explained her errand to the butler, an old man afflicted with deafness, who ignored her request to wait for an answer where she stood and proceeded to fling wide a door, murmuring wheezily:

"This way, miss."

A warm gust of music and laughter swept into Sabine's face, with the sound of moving feet, shuffling over the parquet floor.

Before her was a fine, old room, the rugs rolled back and the furniture thrust into odd corners. In a deep recess near the window a youth sat at a grand piano gaily thumping out a dance, whilst about a dozen young people, the men mostly in khaki, were two-stepping vigorously.

One of the dancers turned her head, stared, and leaving her partner stranded, ran forwards, hands outstretched.

"It's Sabine Fane!" Her clear young voice had a throb of amazed welcome in it. She dodged a receding couple and slipped sideways into the doorway. "You *dear* thing! Where have you sprung from?"

Sabine stooped to receive her kiss and drew the girl quickly into the hall.



"I've brought a note for your mother. It's lovely to see you again, Babs. I wasn't sure — but, of course, the name —" She broke off, incoherent. "No, I won't come in. I want to explain. Let's sit down here." She glanced at the littered settle.

"Nonsense!" Babs seized her arm. "*Mother!*" she called.

A tall, fair woman rose from a sofa in the window and skirted the gay crowd.

"Why, *Sabine!* This is a surprise. Are you staying near here?" She looked almost as pleased as her daughter.

Sabine began to explain, but Mrs. Cathcart interrupted:

"With the Vallances? How strange! Mark never said a word."

"He wouldn't. I'm not a visitor. I'm the housekeeper there." Her eyes twinkled as she saw her hostess' look of amazement.

"You're rotting!" Babs shook with laughter, so infectious that Sabine joined in.

"I'm not. It's the solemn truth. And this is my 'day out'." Gaily she went on with her story.

A boy in khaki joined the pair; a mere stripling, in uniform, vividly young with his smooth face and ingenuous, wide-set eyes.

"Hullo! it's you — what luck! Come and dance?"

She shook her head.

His mother laid a hand on his arm.

"One minute, Tommy, you're interrupting." She added in an aside to Sabine, "Tommy's at a training camp for officers not far from here and has brought over some of his friends to celebrate Babs' latest folly." She smiled lovingly at her daughter. "Yes, the child's got engaged to a neighbour of ours — young Mallison. I don't approve, but nowadays youth has the last word."

"You *do* approve." Babs was scornful. "She flirts with Roger on the sly, doesn't she, Tommy?"

That youth chuckled.

"Caught out, old lady!"

His mother led the general laughter.

To Sabine it was like a breath of the old life. It warmed her



blood. Unconsciously her eyes grew wistful. Mrs. Cathcart noticed this. Slipping a hand through the girl's arm she insisted gently:

"Come in, my dear. You can't stay here, it's too draughty."

"But I won't dance — you understand?" Sabine moved forward reluctantly. She felt at a disadvantage between these old friends of hers and the rigid limits Miss Vallance set. A sudden brilliant idea struck her. "I'll play for you, if you like. *Do* let me? I should enjoy it. I haven't touched a piano for weeks."

Mrs Cathcart tactfully accepted the suggestion.

"That would be very sweet of you — just one dance, then. Afterwards I want to hear all your news."

She steered the girl to the piano in an interval, amused to see the keen glances cast at her and her serene unconsciousness.

"She's not in the least altered," she thought. "But what a sudden change of fortune! I suppose her father lived up to his income? They entertained so lavishly." Sabine was drawing off her coat. "Music?"

The girl shook her head. Her fingers ran down the keys in a series of soft arpeggios.

"It's an Erard!" Her eyes shone.

Babs leaned over her shoulder.

"I wish you'd sing something first. *Do*? Can't you make her, mother?"

Sabine hesitated.

"I'm sure they'd much rather dance."

But Mrs. Cathcart thought otherwise. Tommy seconded the motion.

"Give us the thing that goes like this." He began to whistle melodiously. "Jolly nice — I remember it."

Presently, through the high old room came the first notes of a beautiful voice, a rich contralto, finely trained. The youthful chatter died away. She sang like a professional, confident and absorbed, her eyes fixed on some distant object as though the words evoked a vision that veiled the audience from her sight. Only once did she lose for a second the careless thread of ac-



companionment, to retrieve the slip immediately by a well-placed chord, aware of the cause. She had realized the presence of Mark.

He stood in an angle of the room, his head bent forward, lips parted, drinking in the golden notes, wonder and pity in his heart. For the first time he realized to the full the irony of her fate. To sing — like that — and to be bound down to the narrow round of trivial tasks under the iron rule of his aunt. It wasn't "fair on any girl!"

The last note died away, a fine-drawn silver thread that was cut imperceptibly by silence and a moment of immobility on the part of the singer; no quiver in the rounded throat, the faint pride of the artist about her.

Then, as the applause broke forth, with hardly a pause, Sabine swept into a French soldier's song, with the beat of the drums, the distant bugles, and the growing excitement of marching feet — the gay and gallant lilt of the *poilus*.

It set the whole room throbbing. Khaki shoulders began to jerk, slippers tapped the polished boards as the singer swung into the chorus.

She repeated the opening chords.

"Now, all together! Chorus, please!"

The untrained, youthful voices broke forth, shyly at first, then with the joyous abandon that grows from a sense of good company and a leader who will never fail. For the rich contralto bore them forward, with chords that rattled out like drums. Sabine's eyes danced with mischief; her hands leaped over the keys. A fane to her finger-tips, she had forgotten everything but the knowledge of success — her old, unfaltering, social instinct.

Tommy had caught up a ruler and was conducting with wild strokes. His voice broke on the last high note and the song ended in shouts of laughter.

"Encore! Encore!" They crowded round her. But she waved them away.

"The interval's over! Now I'm going to do my duty." Off she went with a popular waltz.

After a few vain attempts to deter her, the shuffling recom-



menced. Sabine drew a deep breath. Her thoughts swung back to Mark. She wondered a little how he would take it. He still stood against the wall, a silent, dominating figure, a head taller than most of the men, shabbily-dressed yet at ease, aloof but in his element. At the end of the waltz he came forward. The hostess was pleading with the player:

"It's Sibyl's turn. Yes, I insist."

Another guest took Sabine's place.

"And now you must dance," said Mrs. Cathcart. "It's all nonsense what you say. Elizabeth wouldn't mind. Why should she? It's too absurd! Besides, in war-time —" She broke off, conscious of Mark standing behind her. There came a nervous little pause.

"Will you give me this one, Miss Fane?" His eyes met Sabine's rather gravely. "I'm afraid I'm not a crack dancer, but if you'll be merciful?"

Mrs. Cathcart beamed approval. "Just like Mark," she said to herself, prepared to back up his request, if Sabine still hesitated.

But the man left no room for this. Before Sabine could find an excuse, his arm was round her. He swept her forward into the crowd, a nod in passing aimed at his hostess. It said plainly for her to read: "That for Aunt Beth! This is *my* affair."

She watched the pair for a moment, so superbly alive, the big fair man, supple from constant exercise, and the girl with her finished grace and bright, dark colouring. Into her motherly mind, unbidden, rose the thought: "How well they look together — a splendid couple." Then she sighed. "Poor Mark! It's a tragedy. And Sabine's just the wife for him!"

To the girl herself came no such fancy. Her partner had underrated his powers. She gave herself up once again to a captured moment of enjoyment.

"If only Miss Vallance could see me now," she thought with mischievous satisfaction, as she swayed to the will of the dancer. "The last thing I expected was to find his lordship here, and to be honoured in this fashion!"



The music stopped. Reluctantly they halted close to the entrance.

"This way," suggested Mark. "I want, if I may, to show you something." They passed out into the hall. "I'm quite sure you're fond of pictures?"

"I am. But how did you guess it?" she asked,

He smiled.

"You couldn't sing like that without a love of the beautiful." He spoke with a certain eagerness that reminded her of his boyish manner on the encounter in the gale. "It's straight ahead — through that open door."

They entered the dining-room, oak-panelled with deep windows through which poured a mellow light, and presently halted beneath a portrait.

"This is a Lely." He watched her face. "Do you see any likeness to Babs?"

"Yes." She stood back a little. "About the eyes. It's very fine. Why, here's another!" She moved on, interested and critical.

They made the circuit of the room, linked by a taste in common, talking easily, with reference on Sabine's part to well-known collections at home and abroad. Only once did she fail to recognize a famous artist. Mark supplied the painter's name.

"I ought to know it." He smiled at her. "It came from my old home. We sold nearly all the pictures. Had to!" His voice was abrupt. "Mrs. Cathcart's a sort of connection. Her great-grandmother was a Vallance. That's the lady before you. She was considered a great beauty. Artificial, to my mind, but then I don't care for sloping shoulders. Look at the ruby drop on her forehead. I've seen my mother wear that on a fine chain around her neck. It's one of the things that I kept. I shall leave it to Babs when I depart." He paused for a moment and glanced at the girl. "I'm glad you've found some friends here. The Cathcarts are dear people. It must be frightfully dull for you. I sometimes wonder how you stand it."

"I'm quite happy." Her voice was grave. "Your aunt is



very kind to me in many ways and I love the country. Besides I'm beginning to master my work. That's the main thing. I hate failure."

"Yes." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Whatever you do, you must do well. Sing, dance — check the linen!" He laughed with a rueful note. "The fact is, Miss Fane, if you want my humble opinion, you're wasted at Liddingcombe."

It was said with a quiet courtesy that robbed it of offence.

She coloured and answered quickly:

"Not if I really like the task. And feel" — she risked it — "worth my pay! Doesn't that sound brutal? I ought to have wrapped it up."

"I'm glad you didn't." He looked away. "Because I can set your mind at rest most distinctly on that point. You're becoming indispensable to the old lady. She said so herself. That brings me to another matter that is worrying me — since we're talking frankly. It can't be always easy for you, especially after the old days. I can get away when I'm out of temper — bolt, as I did this morning! You can't. That's the pity. I wish I could explain something which would make you understand." He paused, frowning, and glanced at Sabine, then went on carefully, "It's really health with Aunt Beth — of course she is getting on in life. Will you bear that in your mind? She has been a most wonderful woman. You know it's her money that keeps things together. The property belongs to me, but without her I should have been on the rocks, absolutely — obliged to sell it. And she came to my rescue at a time when — oh, it's too long a story." He stared grimly into space and Sabine caught the muttered words: "My fault. From start to finish." They hinted at some mystery. There was pain in his face.

Before she could answer he opened the door. Music drifted across to them.

"Are you going to give me another dance? Just one, before I go? I've got to take that letter back from Mrs. Cathcart — and make my peace!"

Sabine hesitated.



"Well, what is it?" He was smiling. He seemed to have shaken off his cares. His blue eyes studied her, a hint of mischief in their depths. "I don't dance well enough? I forgot your law of perfection."

"No. I refuse to flatter you!" She laughed back. "I'd love to dance but I'm divided in my mind. I'm wondering — Would Miss Vallance like it?"

"It would all depend upon her mood. As a Quaker —" He tried to turn it off, shrugged his shoulders, then boyishly brought out his secret thought. "If it comes to that, why should she know?"

"She *will* know, because I shall tell her."

He gave Sabine a straight glance full of silent admiration.

"Will you leave the decision to me?"

"Y—es." It sounded a little uncertain.

Mark laughed.

"You doubt my judgment? In advance! That's prejudicial. My verdict is that since we've done it, we might as well do it again. If we're going to be scolded, let's deserve it!"

They danced until the sun went down.



## CHAPTER VIII

**D**ILLON's old face was visible, peering wistfully up the road, above the palisade of plants, when Sabine arrived at Sea View.

"I'm frightfully late!" She was breathless. "But I've such a lot to tell you, Dilly. I've been behaving shamelessly — dancing! What do you think of that?" She caught the old woman round the waist and waltzed her into the sitting-room. "One, two, three! Light as a feather — she'd pass for the Russian ballet! *Down* she goes!" She plopped Dillon on to the worn sofa.

"Ah, now Miss Sabine, dear, remimber me age," her nurse panted.

The girl laughed.

"Your age, Dilly? Let me see. Not much more than Cleopatra's when she started out to conquer. Which reminds me, I must talk to you. There'll be a scandal in the village. Yes, I saw you, yesterday, flirting with that fisherman!"

"I was buyin' fish," said Dillon stoutly. "And I'm mistrustful of a handcart. You niver know how long it's been standing all day under the sun."

"*This* weather," mocked Sabine.

She drew off her fur and handed it unconsciously to the old servant who proceeded to shake it before the fire, then, capturing Sabine's gloves, smoothed out the creased fingers.

"And the best-looking fisherman in the place." Sabine was in high spirits. "I shall tell Mrs. Clark to —" She stopped, smiling.

The landlady had entered the room, carrying the best tea-pot.

"Gude evening, miss." Her serious face relaxed, for she liked Sabine. "Yu lat 'un bide a bit," she added for her lodger's



guidance as she placed her burden on the tray. "'Tis frish made."

Dillon nodded. The two women were good friends, though the older one at times felt baffled by the married one's reserve. There was much that Dillon wished to know. Cautiously, by a round-about route, remembering Sabine's warning, she would lead the conversation up to the Vallance household and the old life at Lidding St. Mary, with the present change in their fortunes. The result was discouraging. Mrs. Clark would draw in her horns; the Vallances were sacrosanct. For the West Country is very loyal.

They settled down to the table. Into the old nurse's mind came the memory of past scenes when she would share the simple meal with a small, starched Sabine, grasping her mug. She sighed. Yet it was sweet to feel that she again stood on guard, a homely figure in the background, but a consolation in dark hours.

"I've had one tea already," Sabine confessed gaily. "You'll never guess who gave it me. Mrs. Cathcart! They live near here — that's where I've been dancing. You remember Tommy and Babs, in Rome?"

"I do that," said Dillon drily. "And all the trouble about the fountain. Master Tommy was himself!" A chuckle escaped her. "But his mother was a rale high-up lady."

"Tommy's a soldier now." Sabine's smile died away. "It's rather dreadful, you know, Dilly, to see these boys in khaki, so young, with all their life before them, going out to face death. Of course it's very splendid too, but one feels, somehow, that they've been cheated. Babs is engaged to a young lieutenant, Sir James Mallison's only son, and they want to be married without delay. Mrs. Cathcart's very brave, but it's aging her — you can see it. Both her children snatched up by the war."

Dillon was full of sympathy. She thought "Miss Babs" far too young.

"But I should do the same," said Sabine. "If I really loved a man and he was off to the Front, I should marry him first if he wanted me."



"And if he didn't come back, at all?"

"I'd have given him all I could," said Sabine. "I couldn't cheat him out of that — not the brief moment of happiness." A thoughtful light was in her eyes.

Dillon looked at her anxiously. Sabine smiled, reading her thoughts.

"No, there *isn't* a man, you old goose! Not even a flirtation. Unless —" She dimpled. "Listen, Dilly. I've been dancing all the afternoon with the one and only nephew! Do you think I shall get a month's notice?"

The wrinkled face changed swiftly.

"'Dade an' I couldn't say, Miss Sabine. It depends on the owld lady. If he's after telling her, she mightn't be too well pleased with you." But Dillon was inwardly delighted. "And would he be dancing well?" she asked.

"Yes. I was quite surprised."

Sabine launched forth on the recital of the Cathcart's merry party. She went on to talk of Mark and his schemes for the village. How he had started a boat-building yard, now closed down for lack of labour, and a boys' club where, on Saturdays, there were primitive entertainments.

"They dance too. Mark thinks that the main reason why all the young men flock now to the towns is that their life in the country is so desperately dull. There's no proper meeting-place for the girls and boys either; this leads to mischief on the sly. If you come to think of it, he's perfectly right. There isn't an outlet for natural high spirits. The rector is his great ally — a dear old man, from all accounts. Mark teaches the boys boxing. Also carpentering. They make really useful things, pay a small price for materials, then sell them at a profit. He has designed a garden chair and has got an order for these in town. But, of course, this war has stopped everything. Boys are taking the place of men and they've no time for outside work."

"I've heard of the club," Dillon remarked. "There's a Miss Gull —"

Sabine broke in:



"There *is*! You're quite right, Dilly. She's an indisputable fact."

"Miss Gull," Dillon proceeded slowly, "was wanting the loan of the place. To spake in — something to do with recruitin'. But Mr. Vallance was sayin' no, and there was high words between them. An' then, she gives him a white feather — and him with a face like a stone!" Her eyes narrowed, watching the girl.

Sabine looked disgusted.

"She would. It's exactly like her." She did not attempt to explain.

Dillon drew her own conclusions. They were wholly flattering to Mark. She smiled reminiscently.

"Pratt's boy, the red-haired one, had a word to say about it — he was standing by when it happened — and now it's all over the village. A rude joke that I couldn't tell you, Miss Sabine, about the ways of gulls — thim' that's moultin'." Dillon chuckled. Pratt's boy was the village wit. "He's well liked, is Mr. Mark." She left it at that, well-satisfied, and proceeded to clear the table, piling the cups and plates on the tray. "I'll carry this out, if you'll excuse it. Mrs. Clark is busy to-day and late with her ironing. She's been sitting up over some new flannel shirts for her husband agin the cowl'd weather."

The conversation veered round, as usual, to shared memories of bygone times. It was dark when Sabine, reluctantly, rose to go, carrying a parcel that Dillon had proudly prepared, full of stockings newly darned, and daintily got-up muslin collars.

"And bring me some more, Miss Sabine, dear," were her parting words on the threshold. "Will you see to find your way home? I could come with you as far as the door."

But the girl would not hear of it.

"I'll take the upper road," she said. "There's not so much traffic there! Go back to the fire. It's freezing hard." She drew up her fur round her throat.

But Dillon lingered, watching her progress down the dim village street where all lights were strictly forbidden and even



the *Hunted Stag*, once starry in the darkness, was now muffled behind dark blinds.

Outside its hospitable door, however, stood a landau and pair of bays. The landlord was chatting to the coachman, an empty pint-pot in his hand. The thin footman, apparently, had gone inside for his refreshment, but Sabine recognized the carriage.

As she went past she caught a scrap of the coachman's conversation:

"And she says to me —" The voice was lowered for the landlord's ear alone. The speech ended in a guffaw.

Some *bon mot* of Lady Gull's Sabine privately concluded.

She turned up the dim lane that led to the rectory, the church looming on her left with its squat, ivy-covered tower faintly outlined against the sky. Growing accustomed to the darkness, her eyes discerned a stout figure planted in front of the rectory gate and muffled in luxurious furs. With its head turning from side to side to scan the deserted road, it reminded Sabine of a tortoise. She glanced sideways as she passed.

Lady Gull peered at her, with the distress of the short-sighted. Sabine guessed her predicament and yielded to a kindly impulse.

"Are you looking for your carriage? If so, it's just round the corner."

"Ah!" The stout lady fussed. "I *thought* so!" It was evident that she guessed the cause of the delay. "Thank you." She blinked at the girl, then suddenly recognized her. "Why, it's you!" She drew back, with her haughtiest expression. Her annoyance found vent in speech. "I hear you're at the *Vallances*! Henrietta told me about it. I think you might have said, that day I gave you a lift in the carriage, where you were going to. It shows how careful one ought to be." She tossed back her head aggressively and nearly dislodged the smart hat that was fenced about with purple dahlias.

"To match the rug," thought Sabine. Quietly she explained the circumstances of the case.

Lady Gull listened shrewdly. It became a battle between her pride and her rising curiosity. In the end the latter prevailed.



"I see. Still you might have told me when I mentioned the Vallances' name. But we'll let that pass. Are you 'appy there?"

"Quite." Sabine was on the defensive.

Lady Gull smoothed the fur of her imposing sable muff, searching some fresh line of attack. She had always been inquisitive about the family she had succeeded and whom she cordially disliked.

"I suppose you don't see much of them?" she suggested ponderously. "I hear the aunt is very eccentric — has strange ideas about the war?"

Sabine made no response but Lady Gull persevered.

"Of course *he* ought to go to the Front. I've three nephews who've joined up, so I know well what I'm talking about, and one of them's older than Mr. Vallance. I'd be ashamed if I was him, hiding at home in such a crisis. *England needs every man.*" She brought it out with the triumph of an original call to arms.

Sabine nodded but glanced markedly up the road. Lady Gull, guessing the girl's intention, laid a hand on her arm. She stooped now to friendliness.

"Well, I'm glad to 'ear you're 'appy. That's the great thing, isn't it, wherever our lines are cast? Of course it must be a come-down for you." There was kindly patronage in her voice with an utter ignorance of offence. "One can see you've been used to better things, as I was telling Henrietta, and if you like to drop in one day and 'ave a quiet chat with me I'll be pleased to see you, so don't forget. I *mean* it." She spoke impressively, warmed by a sense of her condescension. "But not this week." She seemed to remember her importance suddenly and relaxed the grasp of the fat hand in its tight suède glove. "I daresay you've 'eard that we're expecting our Member to stay with us? There's to be a recruiting meeting at Lidding Junction and he's to speak. So Sir Joshua has offered to put him up. We're asking the people round to meet him."

Pride oozed out of the words. Sabine smiled in her sleeve. It was, indeed, a great occasion. She thanked Lady Gull for her invitation, without accepting it, and added:



"I've not much time to myself."

"No." Lady Gull nodded. "I expect Miss Vallance keeps you busy! Economical, isn't she? *I've* 'eard of her measuring out the rice and calling in the candle-ends!" She gave a fat, scornful laugh. "Not that I blame 'er for being careful *under the circumstances*, but I 'ope she gives you enough to eat. 'Andsome is as 'andsome does. That's always been *my* motter."

To Sabine's relief the sound of wheels approaching them fell upon her ears.

"Here comes your carriage," she suggested.

"Time too!" retorted the aggrieved owner. "I only sent him with a wire to the post office whilst I was 'ere and I wasn't going to walk back again all along that dark drive. But you can't depend on servants now, whatever you pay them! They're all alike." She hesitated, then held out her hand. Sabine could see that it cost her an effort. "Well, come and see me one evening, m'dear, when the old lady lets you out. I daresay you'll 'ave a *lot* to tell me!"

Sabine thankfully escaped.

She quickened her pace up the lane. In a few minutes the landau passed her with the vast outline of Lady Gull, screened by the drawn-up hood in front, and smothered under a bear-skin rug, a picture of opulence.

Sudden anger seized the girl. By what right did such a woman, ignorant and malicious, supplant the old landed gentry? She was not a true democrat. She had no sympathy with those who led humble lives on her estate, no knowledge of country needs and no real charity. Intolerant and blinded by a sense of her new position, which relied alone on her banking account, she presented a latter-day problem: the rise of a class that in its time would prove more tyrannical than the one it superseded.

Sabine had heard an unpleasant story connected with Lady Gull's household; the case of a young housemaid, turned out at an hour's notice in dire disgrace to tramp, homeless, to Lidding Junction and succumb to the effect of a miscarriage.

Miss Vallance, with all her strict views on morality, would



never have consented to this, nor have imagined for a moment that the catastrophe could reflect scandal upon her house. She could never have stooped, like Henrietta, to insult any man by offering him a white feather, whatever she thought of his conduct. There was a defiant attitude about the type that the Gulls embodied, a deliberate intention in the way they paid back their old grudge against the class which they aped. They lacked some virtue, to be found not only in the old gentry but in the yeoman rank and file that is the backbone of England: a kindly justice based on knowledge gained through succeeding generations and far above the claims of money.

"Thank Heaven I'm not the housekeeper at Lidding St. Mary," Sabine decided. "I wouldn't serve Lady Gull for untold wealth! I really believe that Henrietta is preferable." She thought it over for a moment. "No, there's little to choose between them. The daughter is more practical, but she looks upon the villagers as subjects for experiment—an offensive form of philanthropy. And *how* they resent it! To have a girl expounding her untried theories on rearing babies and so forth, prying into the private life of women who work from morning to night in a struggle against poverty, and yet, in the main, keep clean and cheerful. No wonder they slam the doors in her face! Mark's method is the best. To bring an element of amusement and interest into their workaday lives. He doesn't have Sir Joshua's public satisfaction in a handsome cheque to the local charities, but it costs him all he can afford and entails a large amount of labour. He would shrink from Henrietta's plan of opening wide every window in the cottages she visits, whether the inmates like it or not, but he'd sit up a whole night with a man on the verge of delirium tremens; and the sane soul of the people recognizes the difference. It's love, not patronage, and it calls for no subservience. I'm beginning to understand much that has hitherto been a puzzle. Charity that does not include a respect for the individual becomes largely a selfish impulse and the poor are right in despising it."

Her philosophy was cut short by a figure, emerging from the



gate leading into the stable yard of the Vallances' house, that breathlessly hailed her.

"Miss Fane! Is that you?" Johnson was peering through the darkness, a black shawl thrown over her head and minus her apron. Her face was scared. "I was just about to try and find you, as Cook thought you were in the village."

"Is anything wrong?" Sabine was seized by a premonition of disaster.

"It's Miss Vallance. The doctor's here, upstairs with her now, miss. Mr. Mark sent Steve for him. Such a time as we've all had! As that Ellen says, one minute we're here and the next we're cut down!" There was an ominous catch in her breath.

"That may be true of *old* people, but hardly so at your age." Sabine spoke soothingly, for the girl sounded hysterical. "I'll come in the back way and you shall tell me *quietly*, as we go along, what has happened."

Mastering her impatience — for Johnson was prone to digressions and tearful — Sabine elicited the facts.

Miss Vallance, without warning, had "fallen down in a fit." This was the servants' diagnosis.

Johnson, putting the last touches to the dinner table, had heard the crash and had hurried up to find her mistress stretched upon the floor, unconscious.

"Her poor face all twisted," the girl added pitifully, "and Mr. Mark in a dreadful way. To think that when she complained of the silver I answered her back!" This seemed the climax. Johnson gave a muffled sob.

Sabine, in the sudden light of the house, as she entered, turned, her own face dazed, and laid a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"That doesn't matter. She'd understand. What you've got to do is to help *now*. It's no good giving way, is it, Cook?" She appealed to that worthy who bustled out from the warm kitchen. There was comfort in her buxom presence. "It mayn't be as serious as we think." She tried to hide her own misgivings.

"While there's life, there's 'ope," said the cook. She looked at Johnson severely. "Best get yer cap and apron h'on and be ready



against the doctor's going. That Ellen upstairs 'as got twice your sense and is waiting in case they wants 'ot water. And me keeping the dinner warm if Mr. Mark changes 'is mind. Though the *soufflé's* spoilt!" She drew a sigh from the depths of her capacious bosom. "I could cry meself," she told Sabine, "but it ain't the proper moment for it."

"That's right, Cook." Sabine approved her attitude of common sense.

She ran up the back stairs and gained her room, glad of a quiet moment for thought, as she changed into her morning dress ready for all emergencies. It must have been a stroke, she concluded. The old lady had looked ill after her passage of arms at lunch. Poor Mark! He would certainly blame himself for having upset her. Sabine wished she had stayed at home.

And this afternoon she had been dancing! With Mark. She thrust the thought aside. It was no one's fault—just life; laughter and youth unconsciously rubbing merry shoulders with death.

If Miss Vallance died? Could Sabine stay, alone, as housekeeper to Mark?

"Why not?" she asked herself. "Some one must manage his house for him. I'm my own mistress in every way, and this war is breaking down convention. Of course Mark might not wish it, but if he did I could trust him."

An odd sense of thankfulness succeeded this swift decision. The glance she cast round the shabby room, as she left it, was almost tender.

"I've taken root," she decided, aware of a sudden love for the place. "It would need a tug to pull me up. I'm as settled as a dandelion!"

With the words a memory of her first meeting with Miss Vallance in her blue sunbonnet, spud in hand, flashed across her.

How tragic it was! She beat down her rising emotion, setting her teeth. She would need all her wits to cope with the practical duties of the moment. Yet it seemed to her that the Vallances were shadowed by some inexorable fate that hastened the end of



the old régime, already tottering in the balance. The whole house was symptomatic, not of the future, but the past. Meanwhile the world moved on.

"That Ellen" was leaning stolidly against the table on the landing. From the room beyond came a sound of voices, subdued yet obviously male. With a whispered word to the girl in passing, Sabine went down into the hall. She wanted to intercept the doctor, if possible, on his way out.

She had not very long to wait. She heard Mark's voice above asking for some further detail of the illness. Then his abrupt, "I must go back. Can you find your way downstairs?" and the doctor's equally absent, "Of course."

He turned the corner warily, a thickset man, middle-aged, with a lined face and kindly eyes. Sabine liked the look of him.

She explained her position in the household and asked for news of Miss Vallance.

There was no change, he informed her. He had to go on to another patient but would return at ten o'clock.

"A case of waiting. She's still unconscious. No, there's nothing to be done. Her left side is paralysed. If she recovers — partially — I'm afraid the brain will be affected. I'm going to try and get a nurse but they're so scarce nowadays" — he frowned thoughtfully at Sabine — "and of course it will take some time. Can you sit up with her to-night? In any case Mr. Vallance should have somebody at hand."

"I will. I'm quite accustomed to illness."

He nodded his head, satisfied, the subconscious part of his mind taking pleasure in her appearance, her air of youth and perfect health.

"I should like to make a suggestion, though," Sabine went on eagerly. "My old nurse is staying here — quite near, in the village. She's not a trained nurse but most capable. She did nearly all the day work in my father's last illness. Would she be of use now until you can find some one better? The servants here are very willing but a little scared." She smiled gravely. "Dillon would cheer them up."



"I see. It sounds a good notion." The doctor returned her clear glance. "*You're* not nervous, anyhow?"

"No." It was said with assurance.

"Mark is." He had lowered his voice. He did not seem aware of his slip. He was treating the girl as if she were a member of the family. Sabine corrected the mistake.

"Mr. Vallance is not accustomed to illness, perhaps," she suggested. "I will see about getting Dillon here without delay, since you think it wise."

"I do." The doctor glanced at his watch. "I should rather like to see her. You could take the car and bring her back if you think she'd come at once."

Sabine's reply was to reach up to the hall stand for the first coat. It happened to be one of Mark's. She slipped it on and turned up the collar.

"Thanks very much. That will save time. There's a fire in the dining-room."

But he lingered to open the front door. A growing feeling of admiration mixed with curiosity prompted him to see her out. He had heard of the new housekeeper on a former visit to Miss Vallance, but this girl did not fit into the picture he had formed in his mind.

"Don't you want a hat?" His eyes were twinkling.

Sabine gathered up the skirts of the coat that were trailing on the ground and smiled back over her shoulder.

"I'll risk the shock to the village!"

She was off, down the paved path. Through the still night air he heard her give her orders serenely to the chauffeur. It might have been her own car!

The doctor smiled as he closed the door.

"A character! But her pretty head is screwed on the right way. She's a lady too—a funny position." He retreated to the welcome glow of the fire, straddling before it, his back turned to the cheerful blaze, his mind recurring to his patient. "A good thing if she went, poor woman—both for herself and all concerned. Especially Mark. He'd be off to the war. That boy



has been through a cruel time. I really believe there must be something in that old curse on the family which my father used to talk about. Always the eldest son too."

He took off his glasses and gave them a rub, amused by his own folly. For with the scorn of the scientist was blent a faint, lingering superstition.



## CHAPTER IX

**D**ILLON needed no persuasion. To be under the same roof as her darling filled the old woman's soul with joy.

It was wonderful how she managed Mark, even from their first meeting, treating him with a happy blend of profound respect and motherly pity; at one moment the capable nurse, at another wheedling him into submission with her soft Irish tongue. She brought with her the comforting sense of age and slowly acquired wisdom that comes from knowledge at first hand of the mysteries of birth and death. A shadow lifted from Mark's spirit when Dillon, after one sharp look at the rigid face on the pillow, announced that there was "no death on it" and that Miss Vallance would recover. She did not add her inward conviction that life might prove the harder trial. Her mission was to soothe and comfort.

She persuaded Mark to go downstairs to the dining-room beneath. One tap on the floor of the patient's room could summon him in case of a change.

As she tidied up the littered clothes with the method of her calling, her brain was busy with many problems concerning the two young people. Sorrow would bring them together, she thought, exulting in her simple heart. She sent an earnest prayer to the Saints to avert the supreme catastrophe of the old lady's death. Her design was that Miss Vallance should live, incapable of interference, but a link between Mark and Sabine, thrown into closer companionship and sharing daily their hopes and fears. Death could only separate them. She did not consider for a moment, as Sabine had done, the alternative of the girl remaining at her post as housekeeper to the lonely man. Miss Vallance



must live — that was evident — and if nursing could save her Dillon would do it!

As she turned in the toes of the woollen stockings and rolled them into a neat ball, to be placed with the rest of the invalid's clothes in a drawer that Sabine had prepared, Dillon opened her campaign:

"He's taking it hard, is Mr. Vallance," she said to the girl watching her. "With no dinner, I'll be bound. Don't you think, Miss Sabine, dear, a few sandwiches might tempt him?"

"I could try." Sabine awoke to her duties. "I could go down now to Cook if you think you'd be all right alone?"

"It's better," said Dillon sagely. "I niver belave in more than one person in a sickroom. It ates up the fresh air."

"But I'm going to sit up with you to-night." Sabine looked obstinate.

"Not in here." Dillon was firm. "I could fetch you if there was anny need. It's the bed would be best for you." She paused to glance across at the patient. "And now, there's that poor gintleman with no food to build him up. I should take it in meself, dearie. He'd be more likely to ate, then."

She watched Sabine leave the room and smiled at her own duplicity. She realized to the full her use in the days to come as counsellor and inconspicuous chaperon.

Sabine, still apprehensive of Johnson, who had passed from the stage of tears to that of ceaseless conversation, and aware that the servants were at supper, secretly saw to the sandwiches and carried in the dainty tray.

Mark was sitting over the fire, an empty pipe in his hand, forgetful of his intention to smoke, brooding, his eyes fixed on the coals. He looked up with a start and instinctively rose to his feet.

"What's that? Oh, thanks. I don't think —"

"Yes, you will." Her voice coaxed. She placed her burden on a small table beside his arm-chair. "You've had no dinner and by and by you'll regret it if you don't eat." She smiled at him. "I cut them myself."



With a palpable effort he smiled back.

"That's very good of you, Miss Fane." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "What about your own supper?"

His solicitude touched the girl.

"Cook is looking after me." She spoke rather evasively, conscious of a sudden hunger.

Mark drew forward the other arm-chair.

"I won't eat these unless you'll share them. I don't believe in that mythical meal. *Please?*" His blue eyes were wistful. She guessed his profound loneliness.

"Is that a bargain? Then I agree." She sat down facing him, in the glow of the fire-light.

He moved across to the larger table and poured her out a glass of wine. In handing it his fingers shook and it overflowed.

"I'm so sorry." He looked ashamed. "Has it gone on your dress?"

"It won't hurt if it has. Such an ancient frock!" She was going to refuse the wine, but the sight of his nervous distress caused her to change her mind. "By the way, I borrowed your coat just now to go round and fetch Dilly. The doctor was in a hurry and I didn't want to go up for my own. You don't mind?"

"Of course not." Mechanically he took up a sandwich and swallowed a mouthful. "You've been so good — the greatest help. And your old nurse too. To come like that at a moment's notice! I'm very grateful."

He lifted his tumbler with whiskey in it to add soda from the siphon. It proved to be a malignant one, resisting pressure to burst forth suddenly in a wild stream that deluged his hand and cuff.

"*Damn!*" said the overwrought Mark. "I beg your pardon — I meant —"

"What you said!" She nodded. "I echoed it."

Catching up a table napkin she tried to repair the damage. Mark, like a child, extended his arm, then took the impromptu duster from her. "I don't know what I'm doing — letting you wait on me like this! But you understand, don't you?"



"I do." Her voice was full of pity. "It must have been a dreadful shock. I blame myself for going out. I noticed she was looking ill."

"But that's absurd," said Mark quickly. "It was *my* fault. I upset her. Losing my temper like that, at lunch. I didn't know she had taken it to heart so much until I returned. She thought I *meant* what I said." There was misery in his face.

"But you explained," said Sabine gently.

Mark nodded.

"Too late. The mischief was done."

"You couldn't tell." She was quick to defend him, conscious of all he had endured of late from the irritable old lady.

He turned sideways in his chair, shading his eyes with his hand like a sick creature that hides away from the light.

"I *could*." His voice sounded hollow.

Sabine wondered, but said no more. After a minute he went on, feeling the strain of his burden relax in the flood of confession.

"It can't be kept a secret now. She's had one attack before — a slight one — so I knew. The servants thought it a fainting fit. That's what I meant when I alluded this afternoon to her health. But she wouldn't let me tell you outright. She has a horror of being pitied." He paused. "It's difficult to explain. She has always been such a capable woman, independent and proud to a fault. She could not bear the idea of anyone doubting her mental powers. A stroke always suggests that. All the same, she recognized that, physically, she was failing. The doctor ordered rest and quiet and warned her that any worry or shock might be dangerous. So we advertised for a housekeeper, to relieve her of the heavier duties. Everything seemed going well — thanks to you — and now —" He stopped with a gesture of hopelessness.

Sabine's pity overflowed at the sight of the big man's distress. She knew he was condemning himself. She forgot their relative positions. Impulsively she leaned forward and laid a friendly hand on his arm.

"You mustn't take it like that. Do remember the other side — all your care and your patience. Why, you've been more than



a son to her! And yet you go blaming yourself for one word spoken in anger. It's not just. She wouldn't like it." Her words came forth in a quick rush. "I don't believe for a moment that you were the cause of this attack. It might have come any day during the past week. She *wouldn't* rest — no one could make her! Even the servants noticed it."

Mark stirred under the speech. In his physical depression he could feel the girl's vitality, like a health-giving stream invading him, backed by the power of her will. For her whole soul was bent on comfort. Unconsciously, with a blind action, he placed his hand over the one, slender yet strong, with the signet ring that bore the crest of the Fanes. Neither of them noticed it.

"Well?" Sabine's dark eyes sought his face anxiously. The man, in his grief, reminded her of a child, amazed at life's injustice.

"No," said Mark suddenly. "You're wrong. From first to last, it's been my fault. I was the cause of the earlier seizure. I had made up my mind to enlist. I told her so, and she collapsed. *Now*, do you understand?"

"Oh!" She gave a horrified gasp.

In a flash everything was clear. Many half-forgotten speeches rose in her mind, together with the strange subservience of the man, the unchallenged rule of the aunt. It wiped away her lingering doubts of his courage. For Mark had chosen the harder task of resisting his strong desire to serve his country at this crisis, outwardly indifferent to the opinions of his neighbours, open to insult, guarding the secret of the old lady's state of health, and denied even this last excuse in defence of his manhood. Sabine felt that she hated Miss Vallance. Bigoted and tyrannical, she had won. But at what a price!

"It's dreadful!" The cry broke from her. Her grip tightened on his arm.

Mark slowly raised his head.

"You see?" His voice was very weary.

She nodded back, too moved to speak. For a moment they gazed at one another wonderingly, the material veil torn asunder,



two lonely souls meeting in a sympathy that was based on a knowledge of human weakness. And in that moment love was born.

It leaped forth from the man's blue eyes, wistful then ardent, and lit a flame that strengthened, fearless, in the girl's, full of the passion that had never been lacking in any of the Fanes. So certain was the revelation, so strong the attraction that swept them together that it needed no confirming words. It was more binding than any embrace.

Then, like a sword thrust between them, came a sharp tap on the floor above, as though the spirit of the woman who had lived to rule, in the hour of death asserted the old supremacy.

Sabine recovered her senses first.

"Dilly!" She tore her hand away from where it lay clasped by Mark's and was off like a startled wild creature, aware of the quick throbs of her heart; of fear, joy, remorse and rebellion that swept in waves over her.

Mark followed close on her heels. She could hear his laboured breathing. He passed her as they reached the landing.

Dillon stood there, apologetic, a finger pressed to her lips.

"H'sh! 'Tis nothing. It's vexed I am that I startled your honour. There's no change. I was after dusting the dressing-table and a spool of cotton wint slattering down on to the boards."

Mark gave vent to an odd sound midway between anger and laughter. The old figure in the doorway looked so palpably ashamed.

Dillon's watchful grey eyes passed from the man's to Sabine's face, noting the traces of excitement and a certain strain, unwarranted now she had put their fears to rest.

"I'll be going back," she said slowly. "Askin' your pardon for the fright."

Mark pulled himself in hand.

"That doesn't matter," he told her kindly. "Have you everything you want?"

"Yes, sir. Ellen's brought the kettle up and the coals. The doctor'll be comin' agin soon."



"So he will." Mark nodded and, without another glance at Sabine, went slowly down the stairs.

Dillon waited, unaware apparently of the girl's indecision as her eyes followed the man's progress. His fair head with its short crisp hair turned the corner. Only then did Sabine awake from her dream.

"Shall I come in and sit with you, Dilly?"

"No, dearie. I'm better alone. You go and rest a bit. I'll be fetchin' you when the doctor's here."

"Very well." She was strangely docile. She made her way down the passage, still obsessed by Mark's presence and the tumult he had roused in her. The lamp, lighted on the table, shone on her father's photograph. She bent down close to it.

"*You'd* understand." Her hands went up to press the base of her full throat. "It's here," she whispered, her eyes bewildered. "I never dreamed I could feel like that."

Something in the smiling portrait answered back with a touch of triumph that quickened the girl's faltering courage. She knew that her fate was decided. For good or evil, she loved Mark. Miss Vallance should never come between them. He was hers by right of that perilous minute which had left her powerless yet exultant, conscious of worlds unexplored.

She moved across to the window and opened it wide, unaware of the cold sting of the night air, breathing it in with enjoyment like a draught of iced wine. It helped to still the fire that raced through her strong young body, calming her. She could hear the far-off song of the waves breaking evenly on the beach and the reluctant backward flow that drew the loose shingle with it. It seemed to tug at her heart. She braced herself, resisting it with a sudden sense of battle.

The air was sweet with the wild smell of the salt rocks, and it revived, with the poignancy of remembered scents, her experiences on the first night spent in the Vallances' old house. But the savour of the stocks was lacking. They had passed with the frail tobacco flowers, swept up by the skirts of summer, living their short hour of romance.



For Sabine life was more merciful. She smiled at the fancy. Essentially modern, she faced love without shame, admitting it, and passed on to the region of analysis. Had her old attitude to Mark, the irritation bred in her by his unconscious arrogance been a symptom of secret fear, knowing the virile power of the man, the attraction he might have for her? She tried to recall her first impression. Mark, standing in the doorway — that portal of the Enchanted Garden — in his old blue jersey stained by salt which revealed the splendid set of his shoulders and the sunburnt column of his throat, his head flung back, blue eyes puzzled, the silvery codlings strung together, swinging from his well-shaped hand. A quaint picture, yet it held a new significance for her now: the fisherman of the fairy story, disguised, yet every inch a king.

And how had she affected him? She remembered his first reserve, his suspicion of her mockery, his abrupt and dominating speech at variance with his acts of kindness. Had he, too, feared the spell of closer acquaintanceship? The theory was interesting.

But on one point she held no doubts: his feelings at the present moment. Instinct, backed by experience — for two men had loved her dearly yet roused no answering touch of passion — filled her with supreme conviction. Mark was hers, if she wished it.

“And I do!” She flung the words at the night. Back came the drag of the ebbing tide drawing her out to fresh adventure.

But it brought with it a hint of peril, of unseen shoals and inimical currents. It would not be a placid voyage ending in the harbour of marriage. If Fate willed her recovery, Miss Valance would prove no willing pilot, and Mark himself might hesitate, bound to the frail old lady’s will.

The thought was a sting to Sabine’s pride. She would never sit down, docile, to wait for a procrastinating lover. The difficulties of the position added a spur to the great adventure. Surely Mark would feel the same?

Yet something in the man’s strong face as he turned away from his aunt’s door and passed, silent, down the stairs recurred to her now with a touch of fear. Was it only the remorse that



had become a daily factor in his dealings with Miss Vallance and the memory, for a moment obscured by a stronger passion, of that form, still and death-like, lying there, that had sent him away without one glance?

She shivered, suddenly aware of the icy wind pouring in. Abruptly she shut down the window. It was foolish to meet trouble half-way, yet she was conscious of a reaction.

With a nervous desire to conquer the mood that was threatening to master her, she paused in front of her shelf of books and chose at random a volume of verse, obeying the habit of many years. Would the accustomed sedative work? She felt curious, wondering how great a change had been wrought in her, rebelling against the hidden forces, physical and spiritual, that in so short a space of time had confounded her youthful theories.

She sat down close to the lamp and opened the book that was entitled *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, translated by Arthur Waley. Her elbows propped on the table, a hand supporting her bent cheek, she tried to rivet her attention on an "epigram" by one Wu-ti, who had reigned as Poet-Emperor some centuries before Christ.

*Autumn wind rises: white clouds fly.  
Grass and trees wither; geese go south.  
Orchids all in bloom: chrysanthemums smell sweet.  
I think of my lovely lady: I never can forget.*

Could Mark? She thrust the thought aside, annoyed at her lack of concentration. With frowning brows, she read on:

*Floating-pagoda boat crosses Fen River:  
Across the mid-stream white waves rise;  
Flute and drum keep time to sound of the rower's song:  
Amidst revel and feasting sad thoughts come;  
Youth's years how few! Age how sure.*

"Youth's years how few!" She repeated the line, with a quick, indrawn breath.



If Miss Vallance lived — to that “sure” old age — lived on, broken but compelling, a barrier between the lovers?

In vain the girl tried to feel pity for the helpless woman. All her heart went out to Mark, already saddened by the fate that had thwarted him at every turn; Mark at thirty, seeing the dawn of middle-age on the horizon. She clenched her hands. Youth rose in revolt.

“I won’t let him!” she cried hotly. “He has sacrificed himself enough.”



## CHAPTER X

DILLON'S prophecy proved correct. Miss Vallance came back, partially, into the world that she had known, with fitful signs of helpless life between long torpid intervals. No speech; this was denied her. But in the china-blue eyes the watchers could discern at times a struggling intelligence. It was impossible to judge the workings of that stricken brain.

A night nurse had been obtained, but Dillon ruled in the daytime by the advice of the doctor who had speedily discerned her merits.

"Your Dilly is a treasure," he told Sabine one afternoon. "I'm hoping she will prove a fixture?"

"She'll stay as long as she's wanted," said Sabine. "She's not one of the restless sort. She was with my mother when I was born and when I grew too old for a nurse she remained with us as my maid."

It was said thoughtlessly. The doctor, curious, probed further.

"I don't wonder. A splendid woman. She has travelled, too, I understand?"

"A little." Sabine drew in her horns. She met his amused glance and relaxed. For the pair had become good friends in their constant intercourse. "A housekeeper," she said demurely, "has no need of a maid. I wish you'd bear that in mind."

He laughed and held out his hand, as he stood in the hall on the eve of departure.

"Good-bye. I'll take the hint, but I'll risk a further indiscretion. It's a lucky thing for Miss Vallance that her housekeeper is as good as her nurse."

"Ah, you're 'after the crame'," mocked Sabine.



She had discovered his pet weakness and the fact that Miss Vallance had humoured it in his occasional visits.

"You think that's the only attraction?" he countered, deliberately provoking her.

A shadow fell across the pair. Mark had approached noiselessly. His eyes passed quickly from Sabine's face to the medical man. In the glance she read a covert suspicion. It hurt her pride. She smiled at the doctor.

"I mustn't stay, frivolling! I've work to do. Good-bye." She vanished with a friendly nod.

The doctor picked up his hat, then paused, aware of Mark's air of gloom.

"That's a clever girl."

"She's capable." Mark's lips closed with a snap. It was evident that he did not mean to prolong the conversation. "Your car there?" It was almost rude.

"Yes, thanks." The doctor slowly buttoned his coat. His eyes were twinkling. He had known Vallance for too many years to feel rebuffed by his manner, but his active brain was searching the cause.

"I hope to heaven I'm mistaken," he mused as he leaned back in the motor. "But she's very attractive. Poor Mark! That would be the last straw."

Meanwhile Sabine, in her room, was facing a pile of tradesmen's books, endeavouring to decipher the local grocer's account, which looked as if an active spider with ink-smeared legs had been cutting capers on the page. She had arrived at this conclusion with the afterthought that a grocer's spider should be an adept at capers! Her pencil broke and she laid it down with a feeling of reprieve. She was not in a diligent mood to-day. Her thoughts persistently turned to Mark.

Was he jealous? She felt a guilty joy. It was the first vague confirmation of her hopes vouchsafed her for a week. For never by a single word had Mark betrayed his love for her since the memorable evening. Only in the company of a third person did he relax from his reserved courtesy. Even their new friendliness



which had quickened at the Cathcarts' house, seemed to have flickered out. She had caught him once avoiding her deliberately in Liddingcombe on an errand to the village. Coming out of the Boys' Club, he had stopped dead at the sight of the girl, murmured vaguely, "Oh, I forgot —" and doubled back into sanctuary.

But his face had been a revelation. She had seen the quick light in it, the longing, and then a curious fear in the blue eyes bent down on her from the top of the narrow steps.

Often in his attitude she divined a hint of apology as though, aware of the link between them, he blamed himself for a sudden weakness.

She laid it all to the score of Miss Vallance. Mark would think it treacherous to take advantage of her state, knowing how she would view the affair and conscious of her disapproval. Sabine's pride helped to widen the gulf between them. The *tête-à-tête* lunch held long intervals of silence, but once in turning to leave the room she had surprised on Mark's face a look of suffering and of protest. With his soul he called her back yet resisted it by the force of his will.

Dillon, watchful but too wise to interfere, noticed the shadows that grew beneath the girl's dark eyes, guessing the cause: those long hours when she lay awake, hurt, rebellious, pondering on Mark's silence, planning wild schemes to break it down that dissolved with the cold light of day.

The doctor himself remarked the change in her appearance on one of his visits. It was a bright Sunday morning, almost warm with its westerly breeze although the approach of the Christmas month had bared the trees and was blackening the leaves of the chrysanthemums.

"You don't look very fit yourself." He studied her face with his kindly eyes. "I wonder if you get out enough?"

She assured him that she felt "splendid."

He turned to Mark, standing by, absorbed to all appearances in some flaking stucco on the porch. Since the day when he had overheard the doctor's merry compliment, he seemed to shadow



the couple with a secret suggestion of being on guard. It had not escaped that genial soul's discerning eyes nor the fact that Sabine resented it.

"I think a drive would do her good," he suggested. "Blow away the cobwebs." Mark unwillingly assented. "I've only a short round this mornnig." He addressed Sabine. "Will you come? I'll bring you home in time for lunch. Much better for you than church."

She hesitated and glanced at Mark who had gone back to his study of the weather-worn porch. His indifference angered her.

"Can I be spared, Mr. Vallance?"

"Of course." He did not raise his head.

"Then I'll come with pleasure," she told the doctor. "It's very kind of you to ask me."

"On the contrary." He looked mischievous. "I always drive myself on the Sabbath, so I shall expect you to see that the car is not kidnapped whilst I'm with my patients. I'll explain however that this was not the *only* reason why I asked you."

"I might go off with it myself," she laughed back, one foot on the staircase. "I won't be long getting ready."

The doctor watched her run upstairs, admiring her swift, graceful movements and a glimpse of her pretty ankles.

"Do you know her story?" he asked abruptly, his voice lowered, his eyes fixed on Mark's impassive countenance.

"Very little. One of those cases of changed fortunes through the war. At least, so my aunt imagined. Naturally I don't discuss her private affairs with Miss Fane."

"Or anyone else?" suggested the doctor. "You're quite right. But it seems hard. She's fitted in every way for a more —" he paused.

"Pleasant position," Mark interposed with a dangerous suavity. "Exactly. She's wasted here."

"You couldn't get along without her at the present crisis." The other looked grave.

"No. She's invaluable." He stared out across the garden.

The door in the wall was opened wide affording a glimpse of



the sunny lane and the banked hedge fringing it. The sound of a boy's high voice drifted in with the steady beat of young feet in unison.

"Right, left! Right, left! *Halt!*"

A troop of village urchins playing the new enthralling game was being drilled by an officer in a three-cornered paper hat, a wooden sword in his hand. A fresh command, piping and clear, shrilled forth and the ragged file, scuffling, eager, but serious, marched past framed in the doorway.

"Bless them!" The doctor spoke gruffly, filled with a sense of the contrast of this peaceful, imitation war and the grim struggle across the water.

Mark suddenly gripped his arm.

"Do you think she *ever* will recover?" He spoke with a fierce despair that went to the older man's heart.

"I can't say — honestly. She'll never be the same again, but there may be some improvement. Why?" It was asked from a kindly impulse to share in the man's obvious trouble.

"If I thought she wouldn't miss me," said Mark, "I should be out of this to-morrow."

"I know that."

There followed a silence.

It was broken by a girl's voice humming a song beneath her breath and a sound of footsteps overhead.

Mark's nervous grasp tightened. He leaned closer to the doctor. "You think that Aunt Beth knows I'm here — that she'd know if I went away?"

"She might. I'd be afraid to risk it." The words came forth reluctantly.

"Thanks." Mark wheeled round, releasing the worried man. With one swift glance up the stairs he strode down the passage to his room.

"I'm ready," said Sabine, turning the corner.

Against the background of polished wood, she made an unforgettable picture, full of warm vitality, the white furs wound round her throat, the ermine cap crowning her.



Yet the doctor groaned in his kindly heart. He belonged to that great fraternity which above all others comes close in touch with the passions that rule humanity. He held no delusions, his faith was simple. He knew the price of renunciation and the rarity of it. A shrewd reader of character, he realized in the girl before him a certain strain of recklessness and a charm that might defeat Mark's purpose, completing the tragedy of his life. It cost him an effort to steady his voice and to say in the same airy tone:

"That's good. Are you well wrapped up?"

"Suffocated! Dilly insisted on my putting on an old jersey I used to wear skating at St. Moritz."

He helped her into the big car, started the engine and took his seat.

"One of her few journeys abroad?" he suggested as they spun up the lane.

"Exactly." Sabine laughed gaily. "You're incorrigible!"

"Tell me about it. I've often thought I should like a month in the Engadine, but I've no time for long trips. My holidays are snatched by stealth. All the same, I'd love to travel."

He led her on skilfully to talk of her old wandering life, still full of his theory and studying her temperament, revealed by sidelights on men and matters.

"She's miles ahead of Mark," he thought, "in experience. It's bound to count. If once he loses his sense of balance the game will lie in her hands."

Meanwhile Sabine was enjoying the unwonted luxury of swift movement through the air and the wide view of the higher ground, with the sea below, calm, unruffled, reflecting in patches of ultramarine the clouds that hung as though detached from the pale azure sky. They slipped down into a vale and stopped at a little hamlet. Sabine saw a blind go up in the cottage window. A woman's face peered out anxiously with the grinding of the brakes. She hurried down and opened the door to greet the welcome visitor and Sabine was left alone.

Leaning back in the car she began to reflect on a doctor's life,



with the incessant call on his skill and the grave responsibility. It was all very well on a morning like this, but in winter, with snow deep on the ground, the wind beating across the car, at all hours of the day and night, it must need patience and endurance. A fine life, nevertheless, with its wide scope for charity — the right sort of charity: ungrudging help backed by knowledge. She knew that many practitioners worked among the poorer class for a fee that would barely cover their petrol in remote country districts. And the war was swiftly thinning their ranks, adding to their daily work, whilst the price of living was mounting up at an alarming rate. The middle classes were being hit right and left, with no protection. They could not strike for higher wages although they must meet the rise in taxation. They were the people ultimately who would bear the heaviest burden, yet no political agitator voiced their undoubted grievances, no fund would be raised to meet the deficit in their hard-earned resources. They would be heedlessly included in the ranks of more well-to-do employers, expected to double their servants' wages and pay for extended education to benefit the masses alone, with higher rates and costlier food.

Their children, brought up painfully on reduced means, must turn their backs on their parents' loved professions and enter trade as the only chance of keeping body and soul together. Sabine discerned in this again the movement that aimed at abolishing caste. In the end the position might right itself, when England had learnt that what a man does cannot weigh in the balance provided that he does it well. But, meanwhile, in this state of chaos wrought by the costliness of war and the increasing demands of Labour, there would be much suffering to be borne by the silent middle classes in a grim struggle against starvation under the cloak of that "good appearance" expected — and even insisted upon — as the hall-mark of the professional man.

The doctor emerged with a hopeful air, the mother smiling in his wake. She looked at Sabine curiously and the girl nodded, drawn into the spell of the homely atmosphere, sensitive to the



change in it since their arrival. She knew without words that the little patient was doing well.

On they went in a wide sweep inland, with occasional halts, until they saw the spire of Lidding St. Mary church pointing, like a finger of prayer, to the blue arch of the heavens. The conversation had been fitful, the doctor absorbed in his cases. He broke a long, sunny silence.

"I've only one more visit now." He glanced at Sabine. "You're looking better — more colour in your cheeks. Do you sleep well?"

"Generally."

"Hm! I wonder what that means?"

"Six nights out of seven."

"And the seventh?"

"I meditate on my sins." She refused to take him seriously and he gave up the attempt.

"Well, now you shall see our show place." He turned in between lodge gates, down a sloping drive between high woods that descended to the river's level. They crossed the shallow pebbly stream by means of a narrow bridge, lichen covered and picturesque, and were shadowed by the trees again.

"The seat of Sir Joshua and Lady Gull?" Sabine suggested solemnly.

The doctor's grey eyes twinkled.

"Yes. Her ladyship's kitchenmaid is requiring my advice. It's a fine old place — you'll admire it — the old home of the Vallances." He steered the car round a curve that brought them clear of the woods. "There!"

Sabine leaned forward eagerly to catch her first glimpse of the house. She drew a deep breath of delight.

"Beautiful!"

The doctor nodded.

"I thought you'd like it. It's not been tinkered up, you see. The most modern part of it was added in Cromwell's time."

The thought flashed across Sabine that even the Gulls were powerless to diminish its ancient dignity, or brand it with the



hall-mark of money. Holding aloof from its new owners, proudly unconscious of desecration, it was steeped in bygone privilege, trespassed upon but inviolate.

Mark's birthplace. Jealously her eyes roamed over the deepset windows from which a bright, boyish face had once looked forth so hopefully over the tips of the conifers, seeing life as a great adventure. Now he was disinherited, and conscious of supreme failure. The tears rushed up to her eyes. If only he loved her! If only she could bring him comfort — this was her prayer — the comfort of true companionship. Passion was very far from her as she looked at the stately old house, with its clean and exquisite line and colour. The love she felt was almost maternal. Here Mark had passed his boyhood. He was still a child in many ways — the thought was very dear to her. It set him apart from other men she had known in her gay, cosmopolitan life, yet it linked him, curiously, with her father. It was a feature of both men's charm.

She pondered upon it as the doctor drew up beyond the wide door on the edge of a shrubbery of evergreens, still vivid against the bare boughs of the trees.

"To leave room for the family coach," he explained with a glance at his watch. "They'll be coming back from church soon. I'm hoping to get through my visit first but, if not, you'll be all right here."

His wish was doomed to disappointment. The door had no sooner closed on him than there followed the sound of trotting hoofs and wheels grinding over gravel. Round the curve came a pair of bays, their harness glittering in the sunshine, drawing the vast closed landau.

From out of this sarcophagus — assisted by a little man, dapper and fussy, grey-moustached, whom Sabine guessed to be the owner — Lady Gull descended limply, gorgeous in a picture hat with a funereal drooping plume, a musquash coat trimmed with sable, tight boots with patent toes and a broad expanse of white uppers. Black and white — the Sabbath costume! She rolled up the steps, then turned and stared through her *lorgnette* at the car.



Sabine, her eyes glued to her lap, drew a breath of relief when the pair vanished into the house, in their wake Henrietta, carrying a large prayer-book, with an air of propaganda — as though she *dared* the world to be sinful!

But presently a footman appeared with a message from Lady Gull. Would Miss Fane come inside? She got out unwillingly, yet a little curious to see the house. He led her across the hall.

She was shown into a small room, octagonal-shaped with narrow doors, suggesting the use of tapestry in days gone by but now bare, and was left to a choice of seats.

There were little gilt chairs with spindly legs of the kind that people hire for parties, some imitation Chippendale and a low divan in black satin heaped up with yellow cushions finished off with gilt tassels. The carpet was black with yellow footstools — a virulent yellow that verged on sulphur — the walls were yellow with black lines and above, beneath an arched ceiling that shrank from the profanity, was a dado like a racing chess board of alternative black and yellow squares.

Sabine felt giddy for a moment, then she gave a stifled laugh.

"It only needed *that*," she said as her eyes fell on the mantelpiece.

It wilted under a huge clock in vivid turquoise-coloured Sèvres, the dial jewelled and upheld by a pair of stout, gilded Cupids; on either side was a vase of the same, dazzlingly blue, with gilt chains. But in between these creations Lady Gull had yielded to a playful fancy which had once been the prevailing mode at Bradford: a series of little families of china animals, cats and rabbits, dogs of an unknown breed with tight-curved tails, and kangaroos. An Easter egg in mother-of-pearl that held a small bottle of scent completed the list of ornaments.

By the window was a table with a black and yellow cloth, devoted to literature. The *Daily Mail*, the *Queen* and *Truth* flanked a stout well-bound volume, the reminiscences of a peer, and the latest novel by Ethel M. Dell. Behind these, in a Court gown, stood the portrait of Henrietta, aggressively clasping to her breast a stiff sheaf of arum lilies. Her satin train billowed round her



and seemed to proclaim its price per yard, her forehead looked tight with the strain of her drawn-back hair supporting the white feathers. But these caught the eye, fulfilling their purpose. Here was the Daughter of the House. Lady Gull might drop her aitches but Henrietta had "arrived."

Sabine, having absorbed these effects, crossed to the window, heavily draped with lace curtains looped up with yellow.

Here at last was a sense of rest. For a flagged terrace met her gaze, with the silvery grey of old stone. A pair of time-worn statues guarded shallow steps that led down to a lawn of centuries-old turf ending in a sunk fence, beyond which spread the park with dim purple distances and the silhouettes of fine old trees. A peacock came slowly up the steps with a mincing gait, its burnished neck outstretched, head darting from side to side, greed and suspicion in its eyes. As it reached the terrace it turned to the left, conscious of a human presence. Sabine gasped. The tail feathers were missing, ruthlessly hacked across by a vandal hand, leaving a frill of uneven stubbly quills. Its beauty was gone; it looked grotesque, like some creature out of a Noah's Ark, uncertainly balanced on its stand.

"Ah," said a voice behind the girl, "you're looking at that poor bird. Isn't it a wicked shame?" Lady Gull had entered the room. She came up beside Sabine, rustling, important, bursting with talk. "There's three of them, all the same! Sir Joshua's fair mad about it. They was all right on Friday night and like this the morning after. Henrietta thinks it's revenge on the part of one of the farmers. He was always be'indhand with his rent — 'ad let the place go to rack and ruin. Sir Joshua gave 'im notice to quit. Quite right too! Business is business. That's where old Vallance came to grief — always listening to excuses. He 'elped Spendlove — some nonsense about 'is father and grandfather living there — at least that 's what 'e says. But you can't trust 'em — they're all alike — will get what they *can* out of you! Now, come and sit down, m'dear, and tell me about the old lady." She backed to the black satin divan and became inextricably mixed with the cushions. "It's been a stroke, 'asn't it?"



Sabine gave the latest report, with modifications.

The hostess nodded. There was something distasteful in the way she asked for details of the illness.

"Can she *speak*?" She watched Sabine shrewdly, recognizing her evasions.

"She hasn't spoken yet," said the girl, "but of course she is kept quite quiet."

Lady Gull gave a little snort. Pulling one of the cushions behind her, she tugged the tassel, which came off.

"*There!* The modern work all over! I only 'ad the room done up this spring. Pretty and quaint, ain't it? I call it 'The Mustard-pot' — on account of the shape."

"A very good description," said Sabine. She glanced up at the arched ceiling. "The old lid is beautiful."

Lady Gull, unaware of any satire, rambled on:

"It's a bit different to what it was when we came here, I can tell you! But the Vallances 'ad no taste. The whole house was like a tomb! I suppose they'd think this too bright." She tossed the plumed picture hat. "Though it might 'ave suited the daughter-in-law. *She* was smart, from all accounts — though the family looked down on her. Not that she cared! She cut adrift pretty quick, didn't she? Got fed up with Mr. Mark. Well, I wouldn't fancy 'im for a 'usband."

The striped room seemed to spring at Sabine like a tiger in some delirious dream. Her hands were clenched beneath her furs. Only her pride saved her from fainting under this deadly and sudden blow. From far away she could hear her voice, amazingly calm and indifferent:

"Oh, is he married?"

Lady Gull, fiddling with the gilt tassel, raised her head and stared at her.

"Didn't you *know*? How funny! But of course *she* wouldn't talk of it — not Miss Vallance. It must 'ave been a bitter pill for 'er to swallow. An actress — and she a Quaker! With no money and everyone thinking 'e'd marry Miss Mallison. The rich one —" She caught her breath.



"Indeed?" Sabine filled the pause. She was mistress of her nerves once more. She knew it needed but one word to start the garrulous old woman.

"Yes. Sir James's first wife was an heiress and she left her money to her only child when she died. It would have 'elped the Vallances to put the tumble-down place to rights. Mrs. Vallance was set on the match. The most funny thing, to my mind, was that they met at the Mallisons' 'ouse, during some private theatricals. She came down to stage-manage them and caught 'im. She was pretty artful. He followed her to town — 'ead over 'eels in love he was — a mere boy, just twenty-two and she a good deal older than 'im. He married her within a month and lived to regret it. The baby died. Neglected — so the Vallances said. You see, she went back to the stage. I don't blame 'er. He 'ad no money — only what 'is mother allowed 'im after the old squire's death, though of course 'e came in for the place. Because of his marriage she kept 'im close. Besides she 'adn't enough herself although they sold a lot of the timber and lived just from 'and to mouth. Well, then the two separated. Mark came home and there were scenes. He wanted to sell the place and his mother wouldn't 'ear tell of it. Miss Vallance took his part. His own mother never forgave 'im for making such a foolish marriage when he could 'ave 'ad Miss Mallison. In the end she died and he sold it all up, and took the aunt to live with him. Quite right! She'd backed 'im up when all the world was against him. I'll say that for her, though she 'as a tongue." Lady Gull looked virtuous. "I've 'eard there's a curse on the 'ouse. No eldest son succeeds. But seeing Mark was the *only* one I don't understand how it worked. Still, he never 'ad no luck. His father died when he was at Sandhurst and he came back to a pretty mess, everything mortgaged up to the 'ilt and *debts* —!" She threw out her fat hands. "I'd be ashamed to live like that. But he couldn't 'ave cared for soldiering or 'e'd be at the Front now, doing 'is duty as he ought."

"He could hardly leave Miss Vallance in her present condition." Sabine spoke coldly. "After all she has done for him."



"And why not?" Lady Gull raised her voice impressively. "*When England needs —*"

The door opened, cutting short the famous phrase. The footman announced solemnly that the doctor was waiting for Miss Fane.

Lady Gull struggled up, fat hands pressed to the divan, white boots much in evidence.

"Tell him, 'Enry, that I'm coming." Trained to pronounce "Henrietta" with its full aspirate through years of painful articulation, she corrected herself. "*Henry!*" she called as he was making a graceful exit. "You can h'open the window. It's 'ot in 'ere." She sailed out, followed by Sabine.

"I want to ask what's wrong with Fanny," she confided as they crossed the hall. "I don't *trust* these young girls — not with all these troops about! That's why it's best to 'ave the doctor, even if she's on the panel. After all," she smiled broadly, "charity begins at 'ome."



## CHAPTER XI

**A**T half-past eight Dillon relinquished her duties to the night nurse. Her supper over, there followed the hour she loved best when she would steal along to Sabine's sitting-room, beg for some mending and settle herself, a pair of spectacles wedged on her nose, in the glow of the lamp.

But to-night the girl had carried it into her bedroom, preferring the firelight.

"It's cosier," she told Dillon. "Besides it's wicked to sew on the Sabbath! Just sit there in the arm-chair and make a back for me with your knees." She threw a cushion down on the floor and lounged on the hearthrug, watching the sparks fly up from a burning log. "Wood? That's an innovation. They generally treat me to the coal slack. It's good enough for the housekeeper!"

The bitter comment was so unusual that Dillon felt a sudden fear.

"Why, dearie, that's nonsense. As if annything was too good for you. Himself ordered up the logs after a hint I'd been giving him."

"Oh, Dilly, you *shouldn't*!" The girl stirred restlessly, her head flung back on the nurse's lap.

"He was plazed to do it," said Dillon stoutly, "an' there's plinty of wood, for I wint to see — it's only that Ellen's laziness. We was talkin' of the winter evenings and he axed me if ye had a fire. He's wishful for your comfort, love." As Sabine made no response, she continued in her soft old voice, "'Tis lonesome he must feel at times with no one to talk to at all, at all. He ought to be thinkin' of marrying."

She felt Sabine's body stiffen. The girl sat up and clasped her



knees, her eyes still fixed on the fire. Dillon must know — Her thoughts ran on. She would surely learn the truth about Mark sooner or later and wonder why Sabine had kept it a secret.

"He *is* married." Against her will a faint tremor crept into her voice. "Though he doesn't live with his wife."

She did not guess what a crushing blow the news would be to the old woman, nor that it would break down her resolve to keep her dreams to herself. She started as Dillon gave a groan.

"Holy Mother! May Hiven forgive him!" Her words poured forth tumultuously. "An' worshippin' the ground ye tread on, as annyone with two eyes could see! Ochone!" She wailed, rocking herself, incoherent with misery.

"*Dilly?*" Sabine wheeled round to find herself caught to the motherly bosom as Dillon scolded, blamed herself, wept and pitied in one breath.

She found a certain relief at last in an onslaught on Mrs. Clark who was "too tight-lipped for an honest woman," according to Dillon's argument.

"Niver a word," she told Sabine, "and me fellin' thim flannel shirts for Himself; and dustin', and ironin' — and payin' her for the privilege! Thanks be to the Saints I spoke me mind out about the bill before I left — eighteen pince for the cruet!"

Sabine smiled wearily at the typical conclusion.

"I don't see that it matters, Dilly. It's the Vallances' affair, not ours. I suppose it's so generally known that nobody refers to it. Especially as it happened so long ago and for many years the pair have been separated." She repeated the gist of the story told her by Lady Gull.

Dillon listened eagerly with occasional interjections. "Trapped he was, the silly cratur! An actress, with no morals!" and a sudden shrewd appreciation of Miss Vallance's steady partisanship: "Ay, she would — the owld Squire's sister. A spinster and lovin' the boy as her own!"

At last the girl paused, to feel a trembling hand stroking her hair. For Dillon had caught, beneath its calm, the bitterness of the young voice.



"It's yourself I'm troublin' about, honey. Tell old Dilly what's in your heart? Ye *cares* for him?" It was a whisper, full of infinite tenderness.

The girl's pride sank before it.

"A little. Isn't it — weak, Dilly?"

"It's natural," said the old woman. "I've prayed many a night to the Saints, in me ignorant folly, that this should happen. A grand up-standing gintleman and lovin' you as I could see. Did he iver spake of it, Miss Sabine?"

"Never!" Her loyalty rang out. "How could he? I understand now. But it's rather hard, isn't it, Dilly? I wonder why these things happen?" She gave a forlorn little laugh. "I thought I was proof against such folly."

Dillon gravely shook her head. Silence filled the low room broken by the faint hiss of the wood where a drop of moisture lingered, the life-blood of the old tree.

"We'll have to be quitting this now, Miss Sabine."

"No!" The girl started up.

"'Tis the only thing to be done. The only honest thing, dearie." The wrinkled eyes were full of trouble.

"But we *couldn't* go," said Sabine hotly. "Leave Mark with Miss Vallance helpless and all the house on his hands? It would be a cruel trick!"

"It's crueller to him to stay."

"Why? He doesn't know I care. At least —" She flushed. "I don't think so."

"There's no tellin'," said Dillon shrewdly. "And one day he'll let it slip."

"He won't. You don't know Mark." A curious note was in her voice, half pride, half despair. "And what excuse could we give?"

For her whole heart was crying out against the old woman's mandate. To snap the perilous link between them, part for ever? She could not face it.

"You could be called away," said Dillon.

"By whom? He knows I've no relations."



"You could find the work too hard for you."

"Nonsense! It's lighter now than it was." Sabine stared into the fire, hunting for fresh objections. After a moment she said grimly. "And where should we go? You forget that. I shall never find another place like this, with the same liberty, especially now Miss Vallance is ill. Or be able to have you with me." She heard Dillon check a sigh midway in the deep bosom. "Besides it's not every one in war times who wants the expense of a house-keeper. I'm happy here. I love the place. And the spring's coming — Oh, Dilly, do try and be sensible! "

"Sinsible?" Dillon snorted. "It's meself that has the sinse for both! I'll not be calmly standing by and watchin' wrong without spakin'. It's niver been me way with you — not since you was *that* high." She measured a foot off the ground. "And you'll be of the same mind after I've packed me box and gone!"

Sabine was coldly silent. The log in the grate fell forward, exposing its charred side. She put it back, her eyes smarting with the pungent puff of smoke that drifted out into the room. The wind was rising. It moaned and sobbed in the wide chimney dolefully, with the eerie note of a storm spirit, adding its touch of desolation.

Dillon furtively crossed herself. It seemed like a presage of disaster. She was regretting her flicker of temper as she watched the girl's stony profile. It reminded her of Fane's to-night in one of her master's obstinate moods. She had a sudden inspiration: here was the weightiest argument.

"Your father would niver approve," she said.

Sabine, roused from her dreams, started. Her head went down on her hands, her face entirely hidden from Dillon. The old woman was holding her breath, praying for a miracle. At last, from between her fingers, the girl answered quietly. Her voice was muffled yet warm with an amused tenderness:

"*Wouldn't* he?"

Dillon sighed.

Sabine raised her head with a jerk.

"He'd understand better than you. If he knew what I felt



about it all he'd try and find a way out. Get Mark to divorce his wife. I wonder if it's possible?"

"The Saints preserve us!" groaned Dillon. "Ye know that's very wrong, Miss Sabine. No happiness could come of it."

"That's the Catholic standpoint," said Sabine, unmoved. She got up from the floor and stood looking down at her nurse. "I'm not going to leave here, Dilly. You, of course, must act as you please. I've taken you into my confidence, but I can't agree with your judgment. Quite apart from Mark's presence I feel bound to stay with Miss Vallance. I believe she knows what goes on — anyhow, at intervals. If I vanished she might guess the truth. It might kill her — you can't tell. In any case she'd be cruel to Mark. I'm not going to have him punished — I mean, of course, if she recovers. Besides there's another matter. It may comfort you a little." The hardness suddenly left her voice. For down the wrinkled, old cheek a tear was slowly making its way. It fell on the tightly-clasped hands, gnarled and worn with loving labour. "Oh, *Dilly* — if you're going to cry —"

"I'm not, dearie." Dillon snuffled. "But me heart's sore. And you so proud that I've held in me arms —" She broke down.

Sabine, deeply remorseful, hugged her.

"*Dear* old Dilly — I'm a beast! I promise you I'll be good. But I won't go away — not yet. It mayn't be for very long — that's what I was trying to tell you. Listen, Dilly." She wiped away the tears from the fond old eyes. "That's better. Now, cheer up! The doctor thinks that with the spring there may be a change — for better or worse. We must wait — just a few months more — and see Mark through the hardest part. If she recovers, I'll find a way."

"And if she dies?" said Dillon quickly.

"Mark would enlist at once. I know that — it's his secret desire. He'd be off as soon as the funeral was over. It's only his aunt who has kept him here. She has treated him *shamefully*! No, I can't help it — I know she's ill. But his life has been a martyrdom."

Dillon held the girl closer, as she lay thrown forward across



the lap that had been her refuge in childish troubles. She ventured a last protest:

"And you, Miss Sabine, have you stopped to think how *you'd* be treating him? With his love for you and thrown together day after day — the long temptation? Is it fair on him — answer me that?"

"It can't be worse than it is at present. And I don't believe he cares much. He has never breathed a word to me — it may be all imagination. But he's told me things about himself. How he's longed to go and be a soldier and the real reason why he couldn't. I think the fact that I *understand*, that I'm not like that worm, Henrietta, makes all the difference now — just some one who believes in him."

Her arms went up round the nurse's neck, her fresh lips pressed the seamed old face. She coaxed like a spoilt child.

"Just wait, Dilly. Only a few weeks more. I'll tell you everything that happens. He's so alone — poor Mark! And now I feel I can help him, now that I know everything. I shall just be the best of friends — nothing more! Can't you trust me?"

Dillon was wax in her hands.

"I can that, Miss Sabine, darling. You was well brought up. I saw to it." Loyally she included Fane, "And your poor dear father too. Though his ways were the ways of men. With his terrible loss, who could blame him? And run after by the women on account of his handsome face. But oh, dearie, do be careful!" She dared not utter her secret thought: that the same hot blood was in Sabine's veins. "It's playin' with fire, when all's said, and if anny harm should come to you owld Dilly would niver forgive herself!"

"Dilly won't have to," Sabine whispered.

She slid down to the cushioned floor and drew a deep breath of relief, conscious of victory. She tried to draw the old woman's thoughts away from the perilous subject.

"Talking of such foolishness, did I tell you that Johnson wants to be married? To a sergeant in the Territorials, the first time he comes on leave. They've been engaged for over a year but she didn't dare tell Miss Vallance."



"No! Would she be leaving us?"

Sabine smiled. The pronoun chosen showed that Dillon was a fixture, her vague threat already forgotten.

"Only for the honeymoon. She'll come back to be comforted. You can give her no end of advice! You're rather an old darling, aren't you?"

"I'm a silly old woman, Miss Sabine, dear. I'm wishin' your father were alive."

"Ah!" The girl looked away. After a moment she voiced her thoughts. "I don't think I'm doing wrong. I don't, really. It's just — bad luck. Why should I care for Mark?" She frowned, her head proudly raised. "I've known such a lot of men — better-looking, brilliant talkers, clever, rich — yet not one before has ever seemed worth a moment's worry. I didn't *want* to love Mark! If anything, I've avoided him. We started by quarrelling."

Dillon smiled, with simple wisdom.

"Often it comes like that, child. The mind wars with the heart's desire. Love's as much pain as pleasure. I've seen it with me old eyes many a time. It's human natur'. 'Specially on the part of a man — resentful-like and yet longin'. And the girl wonderin' and frettin' because he doesn't up and spake! Himself thinkin' of the future and the colleen all for the blessed hour."

There followed a short spell of silence.

"Do *you* think that Mark cares?" Sabine's voice was very low. But before Dillon could reply, pride came to the girl's rescue. "No, I don't want to hear. It's no good — so what's the use? I'm going to start afresh from to-night. You won't find me weak again." She smiled back at the old woman. "Dilly, you've got two horns of hair sticking up on top of your head. I believe you're turning into an owl! A *dear* old owl — and now, it's bedtime."



## CHAPTER XII

**S**PRING has come — and left cards on you!" Sabine, smiling, held out a bowl filled with delicate Lenten lilies on a level with the invalid.

Miss Vallance was now moved in the day-time to a sofa in the bay window. From thence her blue eyes could drift over the garden that she loved. Loved still, Sabine thought, as a thin hand jerked out and touched the pale yellow blossoms.

"Pretty, aren't they?" The girl nodded. "Soon we shall have all the jonquils and the pheasant-eyed narcissi — your room will be full of flowers."

The light in the strained face died out with its flicker of intelligence. Miss Vallance lay, the speechless lips parted, vacant and inert. Sabine glanced across at Dillon, threading a narrow strand of ribbon into a clean night-gown.

"She's looking a little better to-day. Don't you think so? A better colour."

"Yes, Miss Sabine, more herself."

Dillon was always optimistic, a fact approved by the doctor, and she always spoke in a level voice. She had not the depressing habit of whispering in a sick room, so constant among nurses. Miss Vallance might hear or she might not. She was given the benefit of the doubt.

Sabine added a last touch to the flowers on the table and went on cheerfully, addressing the mute figure.

"Pratt's boy found these in the wood beyond the combe — the very first! He brought them for you. Wasn't it thoughtful of the lad?" She did not wait for any sign but proceeded with her news. "Maggie Neal has had her baby, a boy — they're both



flourishing. It's going to be christened 'David' — so the father told me — after Lloyd George! And the rector's son is coming home. He's so excited; he hasn't seen him since he went to Canada fifteen years ago. There were twenty-nine eggs this morning, so I thought that we could spare a few for old Mrs. Pedlar, 'down-the-lane.' I knew you'd approve. She was so grateful and asked me to give you her best 'respects' and thanks. Mary's doing well in service and has sent the old lady ten shillings. I was to be sure and tell you this as you'd taken an interest in the girl."

Did the silvery head move? Sabine could not be sure.

"And I think that's all," she concluded, "except that there are three new lambs — darlings, with long tails! So now I'm going out with Vox, to give him a scamper on the cliff. After tea, I'll sing to you."

This had become a custom. Music seemed to soothe Miss Vallance and the girl's fresh contralto voice could easily reach her from the drawing-room. On a day when Sabine had omitted the evening concert Dillon affirmed that the invalid had been "fractious," turning her head from side to side and making the low incoherent sounds that were all she could manage by way of speech. After that the girl welcomed the remote chance of giving pleasure. She felt a profound pity for the stricken woman; a pity that passed the confines of duty but stopped short at real love. She could not forgive Miss Vallance for the silence imposed on Mark that had robbed him of the sole excuse redeeming him from cowardice.

She moved away from the sofa, her eyes watchful. For, at times, she would catch a hint of disapproval, a pucker of the twisted lips. But to-day, Miss Vallance lay placid, her eyes, devoid of expression, fixed on the Lenten lilies.

Dillon checked her as she passed.

"If you see that Ellen, Miss Sabine, would you please be tellin' her that I'm short of mending wool for Mr. Vallance's thick socks? I promised to give her a hand with the darning. It's hard upon them that he is."



"Well, he does a good deal of walking," said Sabine, "now that the pony's ill." There was a note of eager excuse in her voice and Dillon frowned. Sabine darted a quick glance across to the bay window. Had those deaf ears caught it? "I'll tell Ellen." She went out.

In the hall Vox met her with an upward, intelligent scrutiny that took in her garden hat. He squirmed with joy and barked hoarsely.

"Good boy!" She patted his head. "We'll go and look for the bunny-rabbits."

The dog had become her faithful slave. For the first few weeks of Miss Vallance's illness he had clung to the sick-room, refusing to leave his old mistress. But when she vouchsafed no sign of his presence, missing her touch and the sound of her voice he had taken offence. Now no person could lure him into that dumb presence. He attached himself to the young girl, finding in her a consolation for the amazing change in his life.

Mark, amused, had remarked upon it.

"A case of Androcles and the Lion! He's never forgotten that thorn in his foot."

For Time had eased the strain between the young couple thrown together hourly by the household needs.

Sabine's cheerful attitude, friendly and non-committal, had taken due effect on Mark. She had been true to her promise to Dillon: "the best of friends — nothing more!"

Yet under their outwardly casual manner, romance lurked. There were minutes tense with a feeling of spiritual nearness, betrayed in an averted glance, a speech that trailed away into silence. Mark, abruptly, would turn aside, Sabine remember some pressing duty. They avoided all personal contact: a sure sign of latent passion. For weeks they had not shaken hands, substituting a brisk "good-night" with a friendly nod or a laughing "good-morning," and Mark would back into a room sooner than pass the girl in a passage — those narrow passages that brought the sense of her youth and her fresh, young beauty like a waft of perfumed air to his face. He steeled his heart against



temptation. She, with a pride that matched his own, never wilfully stooped to attract him.

Now, spring had come. The crocuses starred the borders in the garden, displacing the first fragile snowdrops. Everywhere were budding branches, the sap rising, the red earth rich with promise of hidden life. Birds mated and broke into song, and even Vox was aware of the wild, sweet music of Pan's pipes.

After a solemn moment spent with wet, black nose pressed to the ground, he was off with a lumbering trot across the combe, deaf to whistling, following up the hidden trail.

Sabine shouted, cracked her whip, and started to run in pursuit. But Vox vanished into space.

When she came to the cutting that led to the beach, she paused and called his name again. The sea-mews answered her, and the soft ripple of the waves, breaking with a lace-like edge of froth below the ridge of seaweed that marked the limit of high tide. There was no sign of the dog. The blue water called to her, the moist sand clean and firm, shells glistening, with here and there a stranded star-fish or "mock sponge"; in the rocks small crabs scuttled and anemones waved their feathery tendrils; everywhere were hidden treasures. She succumbed to their magic.

She turned to the left when she passed the shingle, gathering trophies on her way, moss-like seaweed, buff and red, pearly shells and smooth round stones that held the translucent yellow of amber. Their glory would pass when they dried, but now they seemed fairy-like, a part of the spring and spring's wonder.

The soft wind blew off the land. Sheltered by the cliffs above, the beach was full of drowsy warmth; it might have been a June evening. Far away on the rim of the sea the sun was setting — a loveliness of palest rose and amethyst — and a lost cloud like a cherub floated against the still blue vault, to merge, as Sabine wandered on, into a fish-like streak of mauve.

She came at last to where the rocks jutted out to meet the water, the boundary of the crescent-shaped beach. Here she made a discovery: the print of paws in the wet sand. Vox? She



smiled as she saw a mark like a feather where his tail had swept. The trail ended at the rocks. He must have clambered over them; there was no way round save by water.

"I wonder what he's up to," she thought. "There can't be any rabbits here."

She started to climb the obstruction. It was easy work, the shale in shelves, though treacherously slippery where the vivid emerald laver clung, or a wet trail of "pursed" seaweed. At last she reached the pinnacle, cleared it and stopped abruptly.

In a little creek at her feet, only a few yards wide before the rocks began again, lay a wet and shaggy mass, black against the yellow sand; his mouth open, his red tongue quivering from excitement with, under one paw, the reason for it — a man's cane walking stick! Beyond the spaniel sprawled Mark, hatless, his trousers rolled up to his knees and minus his boots and socks. An open book fluttered beside him, relinquished for his game with the dog. He was talking to it solemnly:

"No, you've had enough for to-day! You're tired, although you won't admit it. It only means I've to wade in and get the bally stick for you." He stretched out a hand for his possession.

Vox growled and scrabbled it closer. Mark flung back his head and laughed. In that moment he saw Sabine, outlined against the sky.

"*You!*" The word sprang from his heart, bringing the colour to her face in a sudden rush of love and fear. Guiltily she looked back, downwards into the blue eyes that, for once, revealed their secret as surely as had his unguarded tongue.

The next moment he rose to his feet.

"Do you want to get down?" His voice was constrained. He hesitated, then held out his hand.

"No — yes." Confusion seized her. "I can manage alone! I was — looking for Vox."

She took a reckless step forwards, slipped, lost her balance and jumped, just as Mark, seeing the danger, made an instinctive movement to catch her.

She landed full in his arms with a little breathless gasp of



fear, her cheek grazing the end of his chin. At this sudden, unforeseen contact, the control of months crumbled and fell. He strained her to him.

"Oh, Sabine, *Sabine!*"

Spring had caught them in her net.

. . . . .

Mark was the first to recover his senses.

"God forgive me!" He stepped back.

But the girl stood there facing him with the glow of the sunset on her skin, lips still warm with his kisses. She looked proud, almost triumphant, in contrast to the man's despair.

"I'm *glad*." Her voice was low but clear.

"But you don't know —"

"I *do* know! Everything. About your wife and — Oh, if you go blaming yourself any more I shall shake you!" She stamped her foot on the sand.

He stared at her, hurt and amazed.

"Mark?" Her voice held a new note, possessive and full of charm. "You must listen to me. It's not our fault — it was something outside us, a force beyond. We've done our best, both of us, to avoid this — we've played fair. But now it's happened we can't *pretend*. It's too childish. You love me and I know it. I love you with all my heart. And I can't see that it's wrong. It's more honest to face it together than to go on as we were before. So if you think that I regret" — for a moment her quick speech faltered, but her eyes never left his face, and she went on inexorably — "that moment of happiness, I don't. It's mine — no one can take it from me! Yours too. You must never doubt it. It has given me back my lost pride."

He made an instinctive gesture of protest.

She smiled at him, her head high.

"Yes. Do you think it has been easy all these last months? To know that my heart was given to you, and that you, perhaps, pitied me for my blindness, caring little or nothing yourself —"



He broke in:

"You *know* I care. If I loved you less should I think, day and night, of your honour? Guard every look and word for fear of insulting you? Do you think I'm the sort of holy prig who goes prattling about his soul, wrapping it up in cotton-wool and living for his neighbours' verdict?" He bent down over her, passionate anger on his face. "Do you think I did it for *myself*? Good God! It's like a woman!"

"It's not like *me*." She spoke bravely. "I know men — I'm not a child. Since you put it in that way I'll accept it, as the finest tribute ever paid me." Love crept back into her voice. "I'm glad you told me. I'm glad this happened. If I went from here to-night and never saw your face again, I should never forget; I should hold the secret of your love deep down in my heart and it would last me — for a lifetime."

She saw the resentment die out of his face and the longing return.

"It's not fair." His voice was rough. "Here am I, bound, as you know, hand and foot — a poor man and a failure. I've nothing to offer you in return. *You*" — he choked on the word — "who could have all the world at your feet. I can't even go away and pray that you'll learn to forget me. I daren't leave Aunt Beth. Even if I wanted to." The words were added under his breath.

"But *I* could." She looked past him out to the fading light of the sunset.

"No!" It was wrung from him. "You *want* to go?" He studied her face.

"It depends on you. In my turn I'm wondering if it's fair play? Would you be happier without me?"

A sudden silence fell between them. Mark broke it huskily:

"I think I should cut my throat! Unless you went of your own free will. To feel that I'd *driven* you from here!"

Silently her eyes thanked him. She sat down on a rock and pointed to the sand before her.



"I can't talk to you up there."

Mark simply obeyed her gesture.

Her glance wandered over him, his sinewy length, the strong brown hands and the contrast of his white feet. She had not realized before, in his rough boots, how well they were shaped, with their high arch that bespoke his birth and the neat moulding of the ankles. A thrill of pride ran through her. He belonged to her — not that other woman. And since he loved her — Her thoughts surged on.

But Mark had begun to speak.

"I suppose you know all my story?"

"Yes. Lady Gull told me."

"She would tell it well." His voice was dry. "Did she mention that I'd had a son?"

Sabine nodded, in silent pity.

"I loved him," said Mark simply. "He died, through my wife's neglect. I think she was glad to be rid of him, except for the thought that he might inherit the old place — but that went too. After that I cut loose. I hated her. I do still. I don't even know where she is. She draws her money through her banker's. But I have to support her, which means that, except in the way of clothes — and those don't cost me much — I'm almost dependent on Aunt Beth. She has been more than a mother to me. I shall stand by her as long as she lives. I don't think it will be long. Then I shall go to the Front." A sombre light came into his eyes. "It's the cleanest way of making an end — but I pray for one good fight first."

"Pray for more than that," said Sabine.

He looked at her wonderingly, with the unconscious absorption of love that feeds upon minute detail: a little lock of wind-blown hair, the dear, familiar curve of a cheek.

"For victory?" His voice was weary.

"I wasn't thinking of the war." She made a movement as though she brushed the subject impatiently aside. "I was thinking of ourselves. I can't believe that this love has been given us



to be utterly wasted — that this is the end.” Her lips closed sharply.

“It must be.” He looked hopelessly over the water.

She paid him no attention but went on steadily:

“I shall stay here as long as you want me. I can’t pretend not to love you — that’s only a silly convention. The fact remains. But I’m clever enough to disguise it from every one else but yourself. I shan’t even let Dilly guess that anything like this has happened. It’s *our* secret, yours and mine. And I think, if we’re wise, Mark, we can get a scrap of comfort from it. The very fact of your telling me has made the world a different place. Just to *know* —” Her voice vibrated. “It won’t be so hard for me now. It’s you — I’m worrying over you.”

“You needn’t. I’m a man.”

A faint smile curved her lips.

“Yes, you’re a man all right.”

A seagull rose from the water and swooped past on silvery wings, uttering its mournful note. The girl followed it with her eyes. It was joined by another and the pair circled up to the cliffs seeking their hidden nest. For them were no moral laws, only instinct: Mother Carey counting her chickens and crying for more.

“We never asked for it,” said Sabine. “We’ve tried to be strong and we’ve failed, reaching the human limit. There must be something ahead for us. I feel it — I simply *won’t* lose courage. We shall come together one day. In some ways I’m a fatalist. Why was I brought to Liddingcombe? A mad adventure from the start. Yet the very name of the place caught me, like a voice calling me home. I believe we were meant for one another. We’ve both been through bad times, you especially, my dear.” She saw Mark’s hand clench. “No, I won’t make it harder for you. It slipped out. I promise, Mark. But I shall be there when you want me and you’ll know that there’s some one who understands — who believes in you *utterly*.”

He turned to her, his heart in his eyes.

“You *do*?”



She nodded, the tears rising. With an effort she brought out the words:

"I'm so frightfully proud of you." She sprang up. "I'm going now. No, don't help me —" Then suddenly, blindly, she turned to him. "*Mark!*" They clung for a moment together. "That's the last — the very last."



## CHAPTER XIII

**B**UT it wasn't the last. Not by many a stolen caress and the swift clasp of hands in the dark old passages, followed by scoldings, remorse — and laughter! For Youth's tears are never far from the bubbling fount of the great god, Mirth, and Spring was rioting in their veins. They consoled themselves in the old, old fashion: no one knew — it was innocent. Yet passion grew with each link of habit.

Dillon was their greatest danger. For the old nurse became uneasy. Was it only the soft, west wind that stained the girl's glowing cheeks and deepened the red in her beautiful mouth? Only youth that brought the throb into her voice when she sang? In the deserted drawing-room, did no listening shadow linger, drinking in those velvety notes? Who bathed in the early morning? Sabine — and Sabine alone?

Once, rising betimes herself and finding the girl's room vacant, Dillon had set forth for the beach. In the hazel grove she had met Mark, a bath towel slung round his neck, striding home, a glowing figure of strength and covert happiness, a sea-pink in his buttonhole.

Who had put the sea-pink there?

He had given Dillon a ringing "Good-morning," and would have passed her, but she stopped him.

"I'm lookin' for Miss Sabine, sir. Would she be after bathing now?"

"I dare say." His voice was light. "You'll probably find her in the tent, preparing for a fight with the waves. There's a bit of a swell on this morning. You don't feel anxious about her, surely?"



"I do not, sir." A loyal defiance flashed from the deep old eyes. "Miss Sabine's a great swimmer."

Mark hesitated, uneasy.

"Shall I come back with you?" he asked.

"Oh, no, sir. Don't you trouble. Miss Sabine would be better alone."

Was there intention in the speech or merely the phraseology peculiar to the Irishwoman?

"Very well." He nodded and passed.

But the next morning he returned the longer way by the open road. A foolish precaution, for Dillon watched him behind her blind under the eaves.

"Then together they were," she decided. "And niver a word from Miss Sabine! He'll be comin' that way to misguide me." Her faithful heart was heavy as lead.

She watched Miss Vallance sombrely. She could find no change in her. If only Death would intervene? She excused the half-uttered prayer with the familiar euphemism. It would be a "happy release." Then asked St. Joseph humbly for pardon.

"The poor craytur!" Tenderly she smoothed out the linen sheets — redolent of lavender — fine and worn as the invalid herself, on the bed she was making.

For illness had not coarsened Miss Vallance. Deformed, helpless, she still preserved her fragile dignity, the tapering hands like old wax, the snow-white hair, gossamer.

Mark would sit by her for hours, gazing out over the garden and commenting between long pauses on the changes wrought by the season. Easter had passed and the fruit trees blossomed. Sabine hurrying through the orchard bareheaded on that morning entered the sick-room softly, her hair powdered with stray petals.

"How is our dear lady?" she asked.

"About the same." Mark's voice was low with the new, virile note in it that Dillon found hard to bear. "The apple trees have played you a trick."

Sabine, puzzled, glanced at her skirt.

"Or perhaps it's the fashion" — Mark teased her — "to wear flowers in your hair?"



She gave her head a quick shake and caught at the petals as they fell.

"I didn't know." She smiled back. "I only ran up to warn you that Henrietta is in the hall, writing you a note. I said you were out —" She stopped abruptly. Miss Vallance had stirred on the couch. Muffled sounds came from her lips. With an effort she framed the word "lie!"

Sabine gave a little gasp. Collecting her wits, she added quickly:

"Johnson *thought* you were out. So, perhaps, as you're not —"

Mark nodded. Stooping, he kissed the old lady.

"Don't you worry. I'll see to it."

The accustomed phrase seemed to soothe her. He glanced at Dillon, his eyes wide. Was this the promised change?

But Miss Vallance had relapsed once more into her usual torpor. He rose, faithful to his word. Dillon, the bed remade, took his place silently.

Outside in the passage he found Sabine, equally startled,

"She *spoke!*" Her voice was full of awe.

"Yes." Mark's face was so stern that she felt afraid of him for a moment. "Thank God!" It was abrupt.

She guessed his thoughts, his heart torn between relief and a curious remorse. It meant that his sentence was prolonged. He was ashamed of the joy that snared him.

Her clear eyes met his bravely.

"I understand."

"You always do." His brow lightened.

Unheeded, cupped in her hands, lay the delicate pink petals of the fallen apple-blossom.

"Give me those?" His voice was husky.

Without a word she passed them over. As he went down the stairs she saw his face crushed to them.

She stood there, so deeply happy it seemed to her that all sense of weight had left her body; she hung, poised, on the wave of a physical emotion that receded and left her weak and trembling.



Suddenly she saw that Dillon stood in the open doorway. The old woman's face was hard.

"She's better. She'll be recovering."

Sabine nodded, avoiding speech.

"It's glad I am," said the nurse. "For now we'll soon be leaving here. I'm not forgettin' your promise, Miss Sabine." Her eyes ruthlessly searched the face of the girl she loved, fully aware of the dimming colour in her cheeks. "And none too soon," she added grimly. With this she closed the door.

A fierce anger seized Sabine. Below she could hear the raucous voice of Henrietta laying down the law in her usual fashion to Mark. She leaned over the banisters and caught a glimpse of his face, arrogant and faintly amused, trying to speed the parting guest.

Sabine moved swiftly down the stairs.

"Hush!" She held up a warning hand. "Oh, it's *you*, Miss Gull — I beg your pardon." Humility descended on her like a cloak but her eyes were full of mockery. "Miss Vallance is asleep. I'm sure you will excuse me. You're so wise about illness."

Henrietta glowered at her but took the hint. They watched her wheel her bicycle under the stone archway. The blue door closed behind her.

Sabine turned swiftly to Mark.

"You love me?"

He frowned at her.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because — because —" Her breath came short. She was trembling.

"Because of Aunt Beth?" He moved back into the deserted drawing-room. "Why, my darling —" The tender words snapped the strain. She was in his arms.

This time there was no evasion, no quick withdrawal, laughter or tears. Dillon had done more harm than good. She had offered an obstacle to a Fane. Sabine took it, flying.

Upstairs in the silent room, already aware of her mistake, the



old woman sat with idle hands, twisting the thimble on her finger. But no inspiration came to her, only the sense of treachery.

"He's been telling her," she sorrowed mutely. "And with doubt blown to the winds of hiven there'll be no stoppin' her now, woe's me! There niver was anny stoppin' Himself, once his wild blood was up. And she her father over agin! Oh dear, oh dear! what can an owld woman be doing — and ignorant, without learning?" She tried to compose her scattered thoughts. "If I went away — would she miss me? I will not, I daren't leave her to him. If I spoke to Miss Christabel? And what could she say or do, the colleen, with no more sinse than this chair! Though her coming may happen for the best — remind Miss Sabine of owld days, the pride she had, and the master's death. I'd be wiser leaving things alone." She glanced up at the clock. It was time for Miss Vallance's medicine. She fed her out of the spouted cup, washed it and put it back. "And only yesterday," she thought, "did that Ellen spake of the curse on the house. Powers of Evil!" She crossed herself.

A light step passed the door and Dillon gave a sigh of relief. Sabine was going to her room to change her dress before lunch. It was a Thursday — her "day out" — and she was to have a visitor, Christabel Lang, the vicar's daughter from the village that held the low white house where Fane had peacefully ended his days.

Christabel was the only one in the secret of her friend's retreat and she had begged pathetically for the chance of a talk on her holiday from work at a canteen in France. It was worth the cross-country journey for even an hour, so she had written. Now that the grey pony was well, Sabine was meeting her at the Junction.

As she drove across Lidding Moor early that afternoon she was conjuring up the girl's face, pale and anaemic with wide grey eyes under the soft flaxen hair. She had always looked so delicate, an eager, nervous little creature with a profound admiration for Fane and his handsome daughter. Yet, despite her timidity,



her fear of strangers and fragile health, she had braved her parents' displeasure and joined a friend in this great adventure. Sabine recalled her first letter with its rather homesick note, begging for some "news from England" and forwarded by Sabine's lawyers.

She had made an exception in Christabel's favour and the two girls had corresponded fitfully for the last six months. Now they were to meet again, each strangely emancipated, severed from the old life by the amazing changes of war.

It seemed almost impossible to picture Christabel in those scenes. Christabel, whose knowledge of men had been largely confined to her father's curates; *Christabel* in a little French town, battered by the first retreat, through which streams of wounded passed, mastering her native shyness and serving rough and muddied Tommies!

Sabine smiled at the very thought; a tender smile, for she loved the girl and respected her for this fine spirit.

The local train puffed in and among the few passengers straggling into the dusty road came a trim figure, eager, assured, her left arm in a sling, her face warm with love and excitement as she caught sight of the waiting dog-cart.

"You've come to meet me?" She swung herself up nimbly. "You *dear* thing! It is good to see you again."

Sabine returned her embrace warmly.

"But what have you done to your arm, my child?"

"Oh, that's *nothing*," said Christabel. "A burn. Jolly good luck, old dear. Shouldn't have got back to Blighty without it!"

Could this be Christabel? Sabine laughed aloud. She whipped up the grey pony.

"How did it happen?"

"A bit of a scrap. Two Tommies rather tight, and one of them upset an urn half-full of boiling coffee. Unluckily I was in the way. I was really sorrier for him. He was frightfully cut up, poor chap, but I saw him again before I left and told him I owed him my leave. He gave me a heavenly German helmet! So I scored all round." She laughed gaily.



"I should think you're glad to be home?" Sabine studied the pale face. It held a new look of firmness, the old hesitancy gone.

Christabel nodded her head.

"In a way. It's ripping to see them all. But I want to get back to my work. I couldn't enjoy being idle now. Besides" — her eyes were mischievous — "Elsie's engaged to the new curate and so important. You'd really think that no one had ever been married before! I say, what ripping gorse!" They had reached the lonely uplands, golden in the sunshine. "Ours is not nearly so fine yet. Now, tell me all the news. How do you like your new job? You'd much better chuck it and come back to France with me. It's wonderful." She drew a deep breath.

"I couldn't do that," Sabine explained, dwelling on Miss Valance's illness.

"You'd see worse things than that with us! That's the part that tries me most. To watch all those boys arrive so gay and fearless, and go to their death, or return, *broken* —" Her voice quivered. "It's awful. I *hate* war."

"Still, it's splendid to be of use." Sabine looked rather wistful. It was beyond her means.

"Yes." Christabel agreed. "And we don't have half a bad time. Some of the girls are so jolly and then we get a lot of freedom, though the hours are long while they last, but the men are very decent to us. We're never at a loose end. There's a big camp not far away and there's no silly formality. One soon loses one's shyness out there. You see we're all in the same boat."

"But aren't the authorities rather strict?"

"On duty," said Christabel. "They can't look after us all the time. They're overdone as it is — getting in stores and so forth. You can guess it's no easy job? We never know what's coming along — we've got to be ready for any number, and then for a few hours it's a rush, every one working like the devil! But I love it." Her eyes kindled. "I couldn't have stood hospital work — not that perpetual suffering. I haven't the nerve. But you don't need much courage to pour out cups of tea and pitch packets of "Woodbine" about!"



The slang, so unexpected in her, fell daintily from her lips. She was prettier, Sabine decided, and her boyish manner rather piquant, the face so purely feminine with its soft, smooth skin and the quick rise and fall of her silky lashes.

She seemed to read Sabine's thoughts.

"Do you think I'm changed?" She watched her friend steady the pony down the hill that led into Lidding St. Mary.

"Yes — in a way. You've come out of your shell."

"Time too!" Christabel laughed. "Arthur — that's Elsie's young man — is rather shocked by my 'freedom of speech.' That's his delicate euphemism when I forget and drop a 'damn.' We haven't time over there to mince matters — we say what we think. And nobody minds. Why should they? We're all working, big and small, straining for the same goal. So long as we're doing our level best, we're equals, men and women. I think, too, it makes us kinder, more lenient to one another. You take people as you find them — and it doesn't matter where they come from. I share a poky little room with a girl who's a Clapham draper's daughter and Sophie Liddell, whom I went out with. We're the best of chums, all three of us, and Laura was awfully good to Sophie when —" She stopped, then lowered her voice, adding vaguely, "I brought her home."

"Miss Liddell? Was she ill?"

"Y—es. In dreadful trouble." Christabel's young face was grave. She began to talk of other matters.

But after tea, when the two girls had wandered down to the edge of the cliff, the subject cropped up again.

"Nobody here understands. They don't realize the temptation — how everything's different out there. I'm not making excuses for Sophie. It was horribly wrong, but she loved the man — and now she has to bear it alone."

Sabine guessed what the trouble was.

"You mean —?" Her eyes met Christabel's and received the unspoken confirmation. "But can't he get leave and marry her?"

"He's killed."

"No? Oh, *poor* girl!" Sabine's disgust changed to compassion.



"That's nice of you!" cried the other. "The first kind word I've heard in England. You see, I've been through it all with her. She was utterly broken-hearted, almost out of her mind at first. Laura and I —" She left it unsaid, and continued in a lower voice, "They called in the doctor and then the whole truth came out. Naturally they hushed it up and, as my arm was pretty bad, they packed us both home together so that I could look after her. I took her down to her people." She shivered. "That was the worst part. They didn't know anything."

No wonder Christabel had changed! Sabine, with her worldly knowledge, pictured the interview. What an experience for a girl!

"It was hard on *you*." She sounded indignant.

"Harder on Sophie," the other protested.

"Were they good to her?"

"Well — in spots!" Christabel's young lips curled. "I don't think they've ever been very human — the scandal seemed to try them most. That and the fact that she wouldn't 'repent.' I got rather tired of that word." She stretched herself on the wiry turf, sheltered by the flowering gorse, her face propped on her one sound hand. "Sophie admits that it was wrong, but she's looking forward to the child. It's all that's left of him now, she says, and they treat this as perversity. I don't believe they'd have minded so much the actual fault — it's the baby! Doesn't sound logical, but people *are* like that. She says he'd have been so proud of it. Of course they meant to get married. He had always longed for a child, like lots of men out there. I suppose they feel that if they're killed there's somebody left to remember — of the same flesh and blood. It's difficult to be altruistic and die for an unborn generation when you're so young and full of life. But your own kid — that's a different matter."

Her serious young voice trailed away. Sabine watched her admiringly. This child would make a fine woman of the new type, clean-minded but facing the facts of life.

"We're back again at first causes," she suggested, nibbling a blade of grass. "Up against birth and death without the polite



social veil. We'd forgotten that the main idea of marriage was reproduction, not a mere social function. I suppose it's Nature taking revenge." She stared out over the sea, the veil torn from her own eyes. The thought had suddenly come to her of what it would mean to hold in her arms a proof of her love for Mark — to go through "all that" for him. She went on rather quickly, throwing away the stem of grass, "I'm glad she really wants the baby."

"It's the only thing she's living for. She says if it hadn't been for that she would have joined him right away. You've never met Sophie, have you?"

"No. Tell me what she's like."

"She's a dear." Christabel's lips quivered. "So pretty, with her chestnut hair — it's almost red — and big brown eyes. She has always been so gay and happy and 'pal-ly' with every one. She's not a bit fast — she isn't, *really*. I can't think how —" She broke off, watching a little sailing craft tacking across the blue bay. After a moment she continued: "Of course there *are* girls out there who don't seem to have much pride. When the evening work was over we generally went for a walk. There's a wood not far from the town where one could find primroses. The men in the camp knew we went there and they used to turn up when off duty. One night, we had the jolliest picnic supper, and another they sneaked a transport waggon and took us for a moonlight drive. Of course there were mild flirtations, but harmless for the most part. There's a sort of feeling that nothing matters — that nothing can last. Death's everywhere. You would think it would make men serious, but it doesn't — it's quite the reverse. They're just boys in wild spirits snatching a few hours of joy. I wonder if you can understand?"

"Yes, it's natural. They feel cheated. *I* should in their place."

Sabine spoke in little jerks. Mark had been cheated all his life, was cheated now of his heart's desire. It made her compassionate to Sophie. She had given love with both hands utterly heedless of the cost. Wrong? Of course it was wrong, but it roused in Sabine a curious doubt of the virtue of self-control



where it was dictated by prudence. They had lived their golden hour together; nothing could rob the dead soldier of that. Now Sophie was to bear his child and refused to accept the orthodox view that it was sent as a punishment. It was Nature's consolation — it might have its father's eyes.

Eyes as blue as the sea below flashed into Sabine's vision, the long straight limbs of Mark, the bare feet with their shapely ankles.

Christabel broke the dangerous silence.

"It's such a relief to talk to you. I daren't tell Mother. She'd be horrified. She'd never let me go back to France. And Elsie —" She gave a scornful laugh. "There she is, facing marriage and ignoring all that side of it. She belongs to a past generation. This war is just an accident — you *can't* bring things home to her. She doesn't approve of me at all!"

"Well, you've changed a little." Sabine smiled.

"But don't you see," said Christabel, "that everything's changed, even Time? The Past lies miles behind us, like looking the wrong way through a field-glass. Those little pleasures and little fears and wondering what the neighbours thought! It's a half-forgotten era. The Present's the only thing that counts. As to the Future, it's further still." Her chin still propped on her hand, she stared wistfully over the sea. "Those boys, now, out there fighting, they're gripping the Present recklessly, living for the breathless moment — a brief respite snatched from death."

"And Sophie gave him his breathless moment?" Sabine's voice was very low.

Christabel, without speaking, nodded.

The little boat heeled over, righted itself and sped onwards leaving a white trail in its wake. Seagulls were wheeling overhead, the only disturbers of the peace. Here were no signs of war, the West country inviolate, far from those scenes of carnage. Suddenly the girl sat up.

"How *can* they understand?" she cried. "Here, in England." She waved her hand in a hopeless gesture to the sea. "I'd like — I'd like —" Her voice broke. "Why, there's a woman in our



village who thinks that we're at war with France! And Mrs. Talbot at the Manor says she 'never reads the papers now because they're so full of horrors'! I wish the Huns would drop a bomb in the middle of the park. It would do Elsie good — Arthur too, with his smug face. He calls the war 'regrettable': 'this regrettable war, my dear brethren.'" Christabel mimicked the unctuous voice. "If I were a priest I'd stand up in the pulpit and give them bitter facts. And then I'd say: 'It's up to you to do your utmost in work and money to help the men out there and keep the country going at home. And if you don't, you'll be damned'! Yes, although I'm a clergyman's daughter. If the Church has any authority, *now* is the time to use it. I told Father so plainly."

"And what did he say?"

"He said mildly that young people went to extremes." She gave a helpless little laugh. "He's an old darling — Mother too. But they're both embedded in ancient custom." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "What about that train, old dear? I hate going — it's heavenly here. All the same —" She scrambled up.

As they walked back across the combe she tried in vain to persuade Sabine to spend a week-end with her in her parents' vicarage.

"Do come? It will do you good and you know how fond they are of you. Couldn't you ask Mr. Vallance to give you a little holiday?" She added, with sudden curiosity, "What is he like?"

Sabine stooped to pluck another blade of grass.

"Oh, he's all right." Her voice was careless.



## CHAPTER XIV

JUNE stole in over the sea, and where her laughter-loving eyes found a crack in the crumbling cliff wild pinks blossomed and every shell grew more translucent, the silvery sands caught the gleam of her shining hair and the magical blue of the water deepened. In the hazel grove, a nightingale, "singer of such pain and bliss," filled the darkness like golden wine poured into a purple chalice.

"Nature can make no mistake," dreamed Sabine. "The nightingale, at the close of the day, calling to lovers through the moonlight to snatch a poignant hour from sleep, and with the dawn a purer song, the call to endeavour of the lark — passion, then far-seeing love."

She looked up into the sky, hazy with heat; above her head a speck was fading out of sight but the clear, sweet notes showered down. Across the short, wiry turf the "pensioner" came lumbering up, his mane still glistening with the dew, and she felt in her pocket for some sugar.

"You oughtn't to have it — it's getting scarce. Still, you're an old soldier!"

He took it from her clumsily and slobbered over her outstretched palm. She gave him a playful slap; he wheeled round, suddenly skittish, and trotted off, still scrunching.

"Ugly teeth — like Henrietta's," Sabine, watching him, decided. "She's altogether the equine type. Many Englishwomen are; others resemble sheep. And then there's the greyhound breed one finds in old families, with the long, fine nose and slender shoulders. Sloping — I'm glad my shoulders don't!" She straightened them, with the thought.



She had bathed alone this morning, with no race to the headland and the childish excitement of beating Mark. Given a recognized start, she knew herself to be fairly matched, yet she wondered, at odd moments, if Mark put forth his whole strength. He was wise enough to win — sometimes! Then, after his hurried dressing, when he emerged from his creek in the rocks and found Sabine outside her tent drying her hair in the sun, there would be the game of prizes.

On one day it would consist of a sea-pink, slipped into his buttonhole; on another, a packet of chocolate which he insisted on sharing with her. Once it had been a live crab with a very active nip! Mark had protested at this; a mean trick when his eyes were shut. He paid her off by producing a blind abortion he called a sand-eel, the next time she was the winner. For love had awakened in both of them the undying spirit of youth.

He made her free of Crusoe's *cache*. She sampled the beer one thirsty morning, the pilot coat wrapped about her, screening the damp bathing-dress. Seated in the deck-chair at the sunny mouth of the cave, she poured a part of the first glass solemnly into the sea to placate the wrath of Neptune. They wondered absurdly what the effect would be on the fishes, and later, the gulls.

"Don't tell Henrietta or we shall have a temperance movement," Mark warned her. "All the sprats wearing bits of blue ribbon! She's so determined, once she starts. I hear her latest wild campaign is to protest against the rations of rum served out to the troops. She's writing to the papers about it."

"Why don't you take the challenge up and set forth the other side?" Sabine looked indignant.

Mark frowned and shook his head. On this point he was reserved. He would not be led to discuss his writing. He was sensitive to mockery.

Sabine watched him, over her tumbler. She emptied it, gave a sigh of pagan enjoyment and handed it back. Mark filled it up again and drank deeply.

Quite suddenly she confessed.



"I found a lot of manuscript the day that I explored the cave. But the page I glanced at wasn't yours? At least not in your own hand —"

He interrupted, his eyes twinkling:

"Will you bet that it wasn't?"

"Yes. Twopence."

"You've lost, my child!" He looked as pleased as a schoolboy.

Going back to the cupboard, he found a pencil and scrap of paper, returned and smoothed the latter out on the sandy floor at her feet. Sprawling there, with his left hand he proceeded to trace laboriously the following inspired lines:

*"Why is Sabine unlike a lobster?*

*Because she omits the saving claws!"*

"Oh, you fraud! With your left hand? That's cheating!" She made a face at him.

"No, culture. I broke my arm when I was a boy at school and acquired this accomplishment. It's jolly useful, I can tell you. I still practise it sometimes."

"Let me look?"

He gave her the paper.

"It's not a bit like your usual writing. Nobody would recognize it. It's the other side of your character." She smiled at him mischievously.

"Unbalanced, what? You've got me there! Well, *you* should know." He squirmed forward and went down recklessly over the rocks into the sea with a splash. "Come along! You'll be catching a chill."

Idyllic days. Could they last?

For there were others when Mark fell a prey to profound depression, when he chafed against the hopelessness of the passion that consumed him, cut off from the only path that had offered to many a man free redemption and chance of honour. Then he would avoid Sabine, take long tramps across country, heedless of meals, and return, dog-tired, to sleep the sleep of exhaustion.

She met him half-way in his moods with the understanding bred



by the years of intimacy with her father. Never did she question Mark or allude to his avoidance of her. No plaintive: "What is the matter? You're vexed about something," passed her lips. He had not to bear the masculine torture of the "home inquisition." She accepted him as a virile man, master of his own soul and unquestioned lord of his habits.

Secretly he gloried in her. Not only beautiful but wise: a man's woman, body and soul, fearless and incurious. What a wife — and what a *mother*, she would make! If anyone could break the curse upon his house, Sabine, and Sabine alone, could do it.

The eldest son? Only once had the prophecy been unfulfilled and then there had been a veiled doubt as to the Squire's paternity. Even he had died childless and the old blood had succeeded, unmixed, in the shape of a younger branch.

The curse, then, did not extend to sons born out of wedlock? That fancy, a tiny seed, took root in Mark's mind. Little he thought that the girl was troubled by the same perilous thought, that love had quickened in her heart the germ of maternity. Sophie's story haunted her and the girl's defiant attitude. She had sinned; she was willing to bear the cost, but not as a punishment. Accepting love she would give life. Surely the scales were equal?

The problem even invaded her sleep. If dreams are born of subconscious desires — as some scientists aver — how much more are the actions of life, when hidden thoughts materialize? The shadow of a little child slipped between them as they moved about the drowsy, indulgent house, danced before them through the fields chasing the sulphur butterflies.

Meanwhile in the silent room Dillon, hopeless, watched Miss Vallance. Since the day of Henrietta's visit no further word had passed her lips. Dillon could hear Sabine singing softly as she tidied herself for the day's work, hanging the wet bathing-gown out of the back window. Youth was heedlessly cruel to age. Sabine could sing whilst Dillon sorrowed, powerless, looking on, disapproving and ignored. They never approached the sub-



ject now that lay nearest to their hearts, avoiding it by tacit consent yet each armed for the conflict should the heavy storm cloud break.

It would mean banishment for Dillon. She knew that and held her tongue. Age, at least, had brought patience. She needed it all this golden June. Yet, oddly enough, against her will, she grew to appreciate the man. Mark was so scrupulous in preserving Sabine from any hint of gossip. His manner to her in public was perfect; if anything a shade austere, with the touch of conscious arrogance that Dillon silently approved. One could see that he was the "gentleman born"! But how did he speak when they were alone, far from the house and listening ears? What went on in those pearly mornings before the world was astir?

To-day Miss Vallance was very restless. She had been difficult to feed. Even the sight of fresh flowers brought in by Sabine after breakfast failed to give her the usual pleasure. It seemed to the watchful nurse that the old lady had some desire that came and went with no means of expression. What did she want? Her blue eyes, unusually intelligent, followed Sabine, and, when the girl after a few soothing words moved to the door, they clouded with anger. She began to mutter fretfully.

"Could you stay a few minutes, Miss Sabine," Dillon asked her quickly. "I think there's something troublin' her, and she doesn't take kindly to your going."

The girl came back immediately.

"What is wrong?" Her voice was gentle. She stood looking down at the sofa. "Don't you like the pink roses? There weren't any red ones this morning open wide enough to cut. No?" For the silvery head had been moved in querulous disapproval. "Then what is it? I wish I could help."

The invalid stirred on her pillows. Slowly the one hand she could move was raised, the fragile fingers pointed.

Sabine, amazed by this lucid action, followed the line of direction. On the top of the chest of drawers that filled a recess opposite stood an old-fashioned writing-desk of walnut inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Could it be this Miss Vallance desired?



Sabine quickly crossed the room and laid her hand on the polished top, watching the stricken face.

"You want the desk?" She was sure, by the patient's expression, that her guess was correct.

With her strong young arms she lifted it down and carried it across to the table. The blue eyes watched her eagerly.

"It's locked," said Sabine. "I'll find the keys."

But Dillon already was searching for them, a little bunch with an ivory tally labelled "Bedroom" in the old lady's neat writing. They hung on a nail in the medicine cupboard and Dillon had noticed them before.

"Here they are, Miss Sabine." Rarely now did she add the "dear" of the old familiar phrase.

The girl took them and, obeying a sudden instinct, held them out respectfully to her employer. Miss Vallance looked pleased. Without the slightest hesitation she picked out a small, gilt key.

"That one?" Sabine was stirred by a rising sense of excitement. Never before had the invalid shewn real proof of mental power. It seemed like a miracle.

She turned the key in the lock and lifted the heavy lid, the desk close to the sofa.

Inside was a shallow tray divided into little sections, one holding a glass inkpot with a screw top of tarnished silver, another for pens and pencils, and beyond this a quaint box, perforated, for scattering sand before the use of blotting paper. The rest of the space was employed by a book, holding this article, with a lacquer and mother-of-pearl cover. The faint odour of old leather and a lingering aromatic scent from a vinaigrette that was lying among the fine pearl penholders stole up to the girl's nostrils with its fragrant suggestion of age.

Sabine lifted out the tray carefully, watching Miss Vallance's face. Beneath was a deep well, filled with packets of yellowing letters, a prayer-book with an ivory back inlaid with a silver cross, and a single long envelope, obviously newer than the rest.

The thin fingers crept out and pulled feebly at one corner. The girl needed no further bidding. She extricated the envelope from under the ivory missal and handed it to its owner.



For a moment the latter lay inert as if mustering her forces. Then the blue eyes were raised with a searching glance to Sabine's. She jerked the treasure towards the girl.

"You wish me to keep it?"

Miss Vallance frowned.

"To read what is written on it?" guessed Sabine.

A faint smile was the response.

Sabine held the envelope up to the light. In the fine sloping hand was inscribed these directions:

*"For Mark.*

*To be opened after my death."*

This was strongly underlined and, beneath, lay the defiant words:

*"Written on Thursday, October 5th, in full possession of my senses."*

Sabine drew a horrified breath of dismay at the coincidence. It was the date of Miss Vallance's seizure!

She guessed that whatever lay within had been penned on that fateful afternoon. The indomitable old lady, feeling the approach of illness, had sat down deliberately to impose her will on Mark from the other side of the grave.

Dillon roused the girl from her stupor by a quick touch on her elbow.

"She's wanting you."

Sabine started. She thrust her apprehensions aside, aware of her present duty.

"I'm to give him this?" she asked Miss Vallance.

In response the first finger pointed. Dramatically it trailed across the envelope under the scored line.

"After your death?" Sabine frowned. Her eyes sought the merciless face.

Miss Vallance watched her anxiously. She tried to speak. No clear words came, only incoherent sounds; slowly a tear gathered and fell, trickling down the transparent cheek. Her helplessness conquered Sabine.



"I will. I promise." She brought it out.

A faint sigh was the response; the nerveless hand fell limply, Miss Vallance closed her eyes.

Dillon moved forward, her face anxious, bent for a moment over the patient, listening to the feeble breath, watching the colour in her lips.

"She'll do."

Sabine nodded gravely. After a moment's indecision she replaced the envelope. It was safer there. She locked the desk and put it back in its old position. Her actions were mechanical, for her thoughts were elsewhere, concentrated on the grim document. What were Miss Vallance's last wishes? Did they concern the war? It seemed a likely hypothesis. She glanced nervously at the sofa.

Dillon's finger went to her lips.

"Sleeping." She hardly breathed the word.

Sabine went out on tiptoe. Dillon followed her to the door. Outside she voiced her fears in a whisper.

"It may be a warning! Will you go find Himself to prepare him? It's a change, for sure, one way or another. I would like the doctor to know. It's not his day but it would be wiser. I must be gettin' back to her." But she paused for a moment and laid a hand timidly on the girl's arm. "You aised her mind, Miss Sabine, dear. The Saints will reward you." Her voice faltered.

So Dillon had read the inscription too and guessed the battle in Sabine's heart? Obeying a swift impulse, the girl stooped and kissed her cheek.

"I'll find Mark and send for the doctor. Dear old Dilly!" She saw the light spring up in the faithful face. It filled her with a sudden remorse. "Don't stay — I'll return."

She went down to Mark's study. The door was ajar and she entered. There was no one there. As she turned to go she saw upon the mantelpiece a flat brown stone, lustreless, robbed of the onyx-like beauty which had distinguished it when wet. But treasured — Her eyes filled. Behind it was another "prize," a tuft of seaweed, crisp and tangled, and a little stick roughly



carved into an absurd figure. Playthings, yet breathing of happy hours. What lay in that narrow letter? A fresh blow for the man she loved?

She sent Ellen into the village to inquire if Mark had been seen there. She did not like to leave the house, forsaking Dillon at such a crisis. But Miss Vallance was still sleeping when Johnson brought in the lunch and Mark was nowhere to be found.

Far away on Lidding Moor, he sat, his head propped on his hands, in a cutting between high flowering gorse, watching away over the sea a "blimp" on the look-out for submarines, cursing himself for his impotence and for what hurt his pride still more: the knowledge that love was lessening his old desire to serve his country. That, between the death which could save his honour and the life of the frail old lady, lurked a more insidious motive, his passion for Sabine, sapping his manhood and driving him headlong into folly that could only end one way.

Mark groaned. In that moment he would have given all his strength to tear her memory out of his heart and to go back to those days of despair when he had seen his path clear. Duty? How could he prate of duty? He was a shirker now by choice. He swore aloud:

"By God, I'm not!"

But the blue skies mocked at him. He stood convicted in his weakness.

That night Miss Vallance died.



## CHAPTER XV

I WANT to talk to you," said Mark as Sabine rose from the table. The pretence of eating lunch was over and Johnson, red-eyed, had left the room. "Somewhere outside." He glanced as he spoke at the drawn down blinds restlessly with a man's instinctive distaste for gloom. "Can you be spared for half an hour?"

"I think so — the servants will be at dinner. I've just one thing to see to first. Tell me where I shall find you?"

He thought for a moment, his face strained.

"Is the beach too far? It's quiet there."

"No. I'll join you presently." She gave him a wavering smile, wondering what was in his mind. Her heart was heavy for she knew the duty that lay before her.

She went upstairs to her room, unlocked a drawer and took out the fateful, long envelope. She turned it over in her hands.

"I must. I promised. *Poor Mark!*"

Then she went in search of Dillon.

"I'm going out for a little. I don't expect I shall be wanted."

"No, dearie." The old woman eyed her wistfully. There was something pathetic about the girl in the black dress she had worn for her father with its shabby silk jersey that revived sad memories. For mourning seems to set the seal on the irrevocable nature of death. "A breath of air would do you good."

It was a concession, for Dillon guessed that Sabine would not be alone.

"I'm going to discuss plans with Mark."

This proof of renewed confidence touched her nurse. She smiled wisely.



"Yes, dearie." Faith for faith; she added no doubting comment.

But the girl lingered, deep in thought. Through the narrow passages came the scent of hothouse flowers, with which Miss Vallance's room was filled; tuberose and freesia with madonna lilies sent in by the sad old gardener, ruthless regarding the coming "show" — a pathetic tribute to the dead.

"I can't believe she's gone, somehow." Sabine spoke her thought aloud. There had been little chance that morning of talking privately with Dillon.

"It's far better, Miss Sabine, dear. She'll be happier where she is. And we ought to be thankful that she was took in her sleep without pain or trouble. She's like a blessed angel now. It should be a comfort to Himself."

Sabine assented gravely. But had Miss Vallance left trouble behind? This was her fear as she went downstairs, fastened on her garden hat and passed out through the porch between the tubs of giant fuchsias.

Their tasselled heads hung languidly. The leaves of the copper beech beyond the lawn were fluttering, turning to welcome the coming rain. For a dark cloud with a coppery rim challenged the might of the sun; there was thunder in the air.

The hazel grove as she entered it seemed ensnared in a spell of silence, the birds already seeking shelter, too conscious of the tension to sing. From a field on the right the pungent scent of flowering beans rose, overpowering, blent with that of the wild thyme on the banks and the sunburnt gorse beyond. Sabine felt her breath come short as she crossed the combe in the veiled glare and made her way down the cutting where loose sand had gathered deeply, impeding her at each step. She had the physical sensation of loneliness that often results from nerves unstrung by a shock. It seemed a foretaste of the future, already the aftermath of parting.

Mark was leaning against a rock, staring over the green-grey sea where long oily streaks appeared like paths without a definite object. Here and there a gull floated, wings furled, upon the



water, close inland. It held the effect of a tin toy, painted white but dimmed by use, in a child's soapy bath.

"Mark!"

He turned with a start to find her by his side. His face looked grey beneath its tan, there were sombre lines about his mouth, the lips compressed as though in pain. Only his eyes suggested youth, so deeply blue Sabine guessed that, lately and secretly, they had been washed by a man's shamed tears.

"Let's sit down. I want to talk. I've so much on my mind." He spoke abruptly, in little jerks.

"Tell me everything," said Sabine. She leaned back against the rock, then touched it with her fingers. "It's hot — I felt it through my jersey."

"There's a storm coming — two storms." His eyes went back to the sea. "One beating up against the wind and the other from the southwest. When they meet, we shall have trouble." He leaned forward and with his stick began to trace patterns in the sand.

She waited, her hands in her lap, loosely clasped, aware of Mark's averted head; patient, with the patience of love when a woman's brains are as large as her heart. She knew he was trying to put into speech a problem that seemed too great for words. At last in despair he blurted it out:

"What shall I do?"

She understood. The colour beat up into her face. He was offering her the casting vote.

Everything that was fine in her rose to help him at this crisis.

"What you always said — go to the Front."

He looked up with a startled expression.

"You mean that? You *wish* me to go?"

The clasp of her slim fingers tightened. A lump rose in her throat.

"I wish you to do — what you think right." Suddenly her voice cleared and her words came forth rapidly. "You must! I can't count in this. I should never forgive myself if you went back on your decision because I weakened you. I can't bear



parting from you but, even if you were my husband, my pride — *your* pride —” She stumbled a little and caught herself up. “Oh, don’t you see, everyone *must* respect you! It’s your duty — there’s no evading it.”

“Sabine!” Wonder and gratitude rang out in the cry. His arm went round her in a grip that was harder than he guessed. He did not attempt to kiss her. It was a tribute almost sexless to a courage that called to his own. “Thank God! I’ve been a fool. I never dreamed — I’ve been dreading this.”

She gave a shaky little laugh.

“What did you expect me to say?”

She leaned back against his shoulder, her body relaxed, suddenly tired. She had utterly forgotten the letter. She could feel the rough serge of his coat against the nape of her neck and inhale the faint smell of tobacco that lingered in his clothes. It seemed to drive the old horror of loneliness away from her. She had him now, for one perfect moment; she was storing up memories.

It was like him to be silent. Her question had required no answer. She smiled, guessing his secret thoughts. From far away over the sea came the first angry rumble of thunder. It made her think of the distant guns. Absurdly, there rose in her mind Lady Gull’s favourite phrase: “England needs every man.” They should never be able to say again that Mark was a coward! Her eyes flashed.

“I shall be so *proud* of you.” She whispered it into his coat.

“Dearest —” He laid his cheek against her dark head. “You make me ashamed. But you’re right — I think you’re always right! There are no two questions about it. It wasn’t because I really shirked it. It was just you and your point of view — and the *hopelessness* of it all! But you understand. I needn’t explain.” After a moment he went on, “You’ll stay here and look after things?”

“Can I?”

“Of course. I couldn’t bear to imagine you anywhere else. You belong here — they all love you. Think of the comfort to



me it will be? You know the village and you'll be kind to the old folk — my substitute. I shall put everything in your hands. It won't be too much for you?"

"No, I shall love it — write long letters and give you all the village gossip. I expect I shall worry you frightfully." She could smile now, the battle won.

"I sha'n't mind that sort of worry!"

"But you'll be careful of yourself? You won't run *needlessly* into danger?"

"No." He had caught the fear in her voice. "I shall try and share your optimism and believe that there's something ahead — for us."

A short silence fell between them. Sabine broke it first.

"When will you go?" She whispered the words.

"Not for another month, I think. There'll be a lot for me to see to. I haven't looked at the will yet but I know pretty well that Aunt Beth — Why, what's the matter?"

The girl had started, with a quick exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, Mark! I *forgot*. There's a letter." She struggled up and felt nervously in her pocket. "Wait! I must tell you — I couldn't this morning. I went and fetched it from her room meaning to give it you directly you had finished your lunch. I wanted you to eat first. I don't know what is in it but I *promised* —" She went on with the story, with growing distress, watching his face change and darken, and the light die out of his blue eyes.

"Give it to me." His voice was harsh.

She passed it over, then rose to her feet. She could not stay there and watch him read it. A man would want to be alone — she felt it instinctively. And she was right. Mark made no effort to detain her as she moved away across the sand, resisting the impulse to glance back.

The storm clouds were joining now. Only a faint line of blue remained between the heavy banks. Suddenly a fork of light split them, dazzling, as though it pierced sky and sea like the thrust of a sword. There followed a clap and an angry peal that



thundered against the darkened cliffs and was taken up by the hills in a series of echoes that swept inland up to the heights of Lidding Moor, leaping from quivering rock to rock, to sink into a sullen silence.

A second flash followed the first, this time from the west, and the horizon grew blurred, like the lined-in portions of an engraving, with horizontal shafts of rain. They blotted out the world beyond, isolating the peaceful scene like a veil stretched between England and France. Was it a presage of that which lay in the long envelope? And, if so, how would Mark act?

All the feminine nature in her was clamouring for a reprieve, but the stronger side of her character thrust it aside. Mark must go. Surely, with a clearer vision Miss Vallance would understand and forgive?

On went Sabine with dragging feet. Reaching the boundary of rocks where the cliff shelved down to meet the sea, she stopped and leaned up against it, her face turned towards the water.

If he felt himself bound by those last wishes? What then? Into her mind rose up the story of Sophie who had placed passion before honour. But Sophie, at least, had held the excuse that her lover was going to face death, to give his life for his country. And neither of them had been married.

Another flash; Sabine winced. Then she heard hurrying steps in the silence after the thunder, and Mark's voice calling her.

She turned round. A drop of rain splashed on her face and she brushed it off. Mark, the old Mark, stood there, his head high, eyes shining.

"It's all right."

She caught her breath.

"She doesn't —?"

"No, not entirely. Though it's rather — pathetic." He slipped a hand through the girl's arm and impatiently drew her away from the rocks. "It's going to pour — you mustn't get wet. I'll tell you as we go along."

Still dazed and unconvinced, she tried to keep pace with his stride. He noticed this and shortened his steps.



"Am I going too fast?"

"It doesn't matter. *Tell* me, Mark?" She frowned at him, her nerves on edge with the suspense. How slow men were! And sparing of words. "She gives in?"

"No, she doesn't. Poor old Aunt Beth! But she leaves me a way out. She asks me as her last request to stay inactive until September. It sounds mad, but I know the reason. This was written last October. She never believed that the war could continue beyond a year at the most. It's been a fixed idea with her. I believe some prophecy or other was at the root of it. I don't expect she told you, but *I* knew. All her plans have been governed by this from the start, even in her household matters. The worst of it is I encouraged it, little thinking this would happen. It soothed her when she got excited and as she never read the papers — the war news, that is — there was nothing to undeceive her. Most of her friends knew her views, that she was a Quaker, and were tactful. Here's the rain!" He pulled off his coat and wrapped it round the girl's shoulders. "Yes, you must" — as she protested — "you've only that thin silk jersey."

She yielded, touched by his care of her.

"Then you won't go — until September?"

"No. I've thought it all out. My conscience is clear. It's her last request. I owe it to her. But nothing shall prevent me later. It's barely more than eight weeks — a month longer than I intended. You approve?"

She turned in the narrow cutting where the rain was already settling the sand.

"Approve?" There were tears in her eyes. "It's a respite —" Her voice broke.

Suddenly, glancing at her, he realized the price of her courage. He drew the coat closer about her, imprisoning her arms beneath and gazed down into her moved face.

"It's women like you who are winning the war. Their inspiration as wives and mothers."

His words acted as a tonic. She tried to laugh.

"That's absurd! It's the soldiers — God bless them! I'm



not a wife." She paused, then added under her breath, "Should I make a good mother?"

"The best." His voice was low and husky.

She looked past him, her cheeks flushed. The thunder crackled overhead and Mark started, releasing the girl.

"It's raining."

This inane remark — for the downpour had been lashing their shoulders during the whole of the brief halt — simultaneously touched their humour.

"You don't say so!" Sabine laughed.

Mark joined in helplessly. It was the reaction from their suspense.

"Come along! We'll keep out in the open and home through the kitchen garden — give the trees a wide berth. It's better to get soaked than struck."

Arm in arm, with lowered heads, they crossed the combe, climbed a fence and dropped into a bed of carrots.

"Mashing them," Mark explained as he dusted the soil off his knees. "I don't often come a cropper! I suppose pride must have a fall."

Sabine had landed on her feet, laughing at him as he slipped. They both glanced up at the house and their smiles vanished. Mark looked guilty, the girl beside him merely thoughtful.

"You cut across by the lawn." Mark spoke in a hushed voice. "I want to have a word with Steve. Hurry up!" For a blue flash with a simultaneous peal of thunder seemed to explode right over their heads. "Go, dear!" His face was anxious. "And change at once."

Sabine obeyed, with a quick:

"You, too."

Dillon, her face pressed to the window, was praying fervently to the Saints to protect her darling. She feared lightning. Presently she saw the girl, running swiftly towards the porch, pull up before a rose-bush to tear off a dark red bud.

Dillon tapped, in vain, on the glass.

"An' catchin' her death of cowl'd," she grumbled. "Besides the danger of bein' struck!"



But the culprit had her own way. Triumphant, the wet flower in her hand, she reached the house and cast off Mark's dripping coat. When she came to Miss Vallance's door, she opened it and slipped in on tiptoe. She laid the fragrant offering beside the meekly folded hands and stood for a moment looking down at the ivory face between the lilies, so mysteriously dignified and divorced from the tyranny of life.

Where had she gone? Could a message reach her?

Sabine bent down solemnly and whispered it:

"Forgive me! I didn't mean to misjudge you. I'm *sorry*."

She tiptoed out.

. . . . .

Busy days followed fast, after the old lady had been laid in the Vallance vault. She was back once more at Lidding St. Mary, and two villages followed her in loyal respect on her last sad journey.

Lady Gull's magnificent wreath with the card much *en evidence* elbowed on the heavy bier primitive posies gathered at dawn in many a humble cottage garden.

"Such a fuss," her ladyship fumed. "She might 'ave been the old Queen! And the coffin carried by fishermen — most of them in their dotage. I thought they was going to drop it once!"

"Pratt's boy was all over spots," said Henrietta vindictively, "and the church *never* ventilated. Measles — I'm sure of it! I shall write and report it. I told his rector the same day, and his son who's just home from abroad had the impertinence to laugh! I must say that the people here are hardly civilized."

"Ah, it was different at Bradford." Lady Gull sighed profoundly. "I often wish —"

Henrietta checked her.

"There you go! I'm sick of Bradford. If only you'd assert yourself. You stood aside as we went in for Lady Mallison to pass and she didn't even say 'thank you'! I wish you'd remember papa's the Squire."



"Oh, I never do right!" said Lady Gull. "I haven't had your *education!* But I married before I was eighteen." She trundled out with the last word.

A few days later in the village she tried to intercept Sabine and learn details of the will.

"You must ask Mr. Vallance," the girl replied at the end of a breathless string of questions. "Catch him before he joins up. He'll be off as soon as things are settled. Didn't you know?" She smiled sweetly, for Lady Gull had given a gasp. "I thought I explained to you that he only remained on account of his aunt and her serious condition of health. Now he's free to do as he likes. He'll make a fine soldier, won't he? Good-bye, I mustn't stop. Did you ever find out who clipped the peacocks?"

From this casual shaft of mischief there arose the amazing legend that Mark Vallance himself had mutilated the birds! Only a mind like Lady Gull's could have leapt to this conclusion. She could "put two and two together," she told Henrietta triumphantly. They discussed it at the dinner table before the pair of solemn men, and the butler retailed the story later for the benefit of the servants' hall. From thence it circulated swiftly through the village to Liddingcombe.

Mrs. Pedlar, "down-the-lane" — a title to distinguish her from Mrs. Pedlar "up-along" — first heard the report and was furiously indignant. Mark called to see her one morning with the gift of some useful garments; for Miss Vallance's simple wardrobe was being distributed among the cottagers, according to her last instructions.

With the loose tongue of old age, Mrs. Pedlar babbled it forth between her blessings, one wrinkled hand, in sympathy, laid upon Mark's arm.

He soothed her, inwardly scornful. Seeing that tears were not far from the blurred old eyes, wistfully resting on his aunt's well-remembered shawl, he added, with open mischief:

"I expect her ladyship is to blame. The tail feathers would look fine in a new picture hat!"

Mrs. Pedlar stored the remark and repeated it to her cronies,



including the aunt of the kitchenmaid at Lidding St. Mary, now recovered but aware of Lady Gull's suspicions. At a well-chosen moment she informed the lady's maid. For Hortense had fallen under the ban of her mistress' wrath that evening. The Frenchwoman thought it her "duty," with a fine show of reluctance, to bring it to her lady's ears.

The situation was not improved by Pratt's boy, suffering from nettle-rash — a bitter blow for Henrietta, who had overlooked this summer ailment. Driving up with his cart to the back door one fine morning, in a shrill voice he conferred with his friend the second housemaid:

"Rackon it du be curious — gulls that turn into peacocks. Small wonder the price of eggs be h'up!" Then, with well-feigned surprise, "Oh — beg pardon, miss!" For Henrietta had straightened her back from a close survey of a punctured tire in the outhouse reserved for bicycles and was glowering at him wrathfully. "No orders? Much obliged."

He rattled off, holding his breath, his face an alarming colour, to break out into muffled sobs of joy from the shrubbery.

Meeting Dillon in Liddingcombe, he stopped to thank her for some lotion concocted from elder flowers and presented by her to ease his rash. Dillon had "a way with the childer" and a mysterious propensity for producing "pear drops" and "bull's eyes" from the depths of her bag. Pratt's boy grew confidential. "Mr. Mark" was his idol. He had "lat 'un have it straight, simly."

"*Measles*," he scoffed. "Yu see, marm, it were close upon Rector's Treat. Might ha' meant Oi biding tu hame!"

Dillon reproved in orthodox fashion, opened her bag and took out a cone-like package, rather sticky. Pratt's boy swore to "behave" and went off, one cheek bulging.

Sabine, of course, heard the story. It came round, full cycle, to Mark.

"The young rascal! And *Mrs. Pedlar*? I never dreamed she'd repeat it."

"Yet you've lived in a village all your life." She enjoyed his



dismay. "That boy of Pratt's is a darling! He warned me of a certain slide just outside the post office last winter. I suspect that he had a hand in it — or at least a foot! He's all feet. But he didn't warn Henrietta and of course she 'improved' the occasion. I wonder why he hates her so?"

"He saw her —" Mark stopped dead.

Sabine watched him under her lashes.

"She deserves some consolation. I think when you're in khaki that I shall give her a peacock's feather."

"So you knew *that*?"

She nodded her head.

"Did you think that I loathed her just because she tried to put me in my place? Now, about the long meadow. It's to be ploughed in the autumn?"

"Yes. It's the best for the purpose. I'm going to Lidding St. Mary to-morrow to see the agricultural committee. There's a meeting. I shall take their advice about the right grain to sow. They'll give you help if you require it."

They settled down to work again. Everything that could be done to meet the country's urgent need was put in hand, seriously. The old order had passed away, the house breathed the spirit of war. Even Dillon was whipped in with schemes for assisting village mothers and their all-important babies.

For Dillon was a fixture too. On that point Mark was firm. Johnson, wisely looking forward to a quiet place after marriage, had decided that she and Cook could "manage" in Mark's absence, with the help of the kitchenmaid and a certain old Mrs. Cumberquick from the village on "odd days." "That Ellen" was to go. Dillon would take on the lighter work.

The Saints seemed to have answered her prayers. With Mark away and her dear one guarded from the chance of any gossip — or worse, Dillon crossed herself — the future looked roseate. She relaxed her silent guard. Miss Sabine had "come to her senses."

But love is never wholly quiescent. Even under a burden of work it increases or diminishes, and here it had the secret spur



of a mutual admiration, growing stronger day by day in the closer intimacy.

Mark was amazed at the power of the girl to acquire and assimilate the knowledge gained by him in the long years. Where he used his reason alone, she would display an intuition that often leaped ahead of him or led to some shrewd suggestion. He had never before worked with a woman of his own age and modern outlook. Though they would argue ruthlessly over any knotty point, he learned to value her opinion.

For her it was pure delight. She was tasting the joys of equality, her brain sharpened by contact with his, and the fruits of an experience of ways and means, men and matters, in wider fields than his own.

Mark as a worker appealed to her, touching that side of her character which worshipped effort and success. He was wise with a man's slow judgment, his honest contempt for compromise and a scamping of labour to save time. Although this roused her impatience in her headlong desire for results, she respected him for his sound views — and loved him still more for his weakness where generosity came into play. Weak he was undoubtedly with many an old cottager perfectly able to pay her rent but begging mercy for "a widder."

"I'd sooner err on the right side," Mark would murmur guiltily, "It doesn't make much difference to me, but it means a lot to her. Poor old soul — she's seventy-two! And her husband was one of my father's grooms." His face relaxed into a grin. "Taught me to ride — surely that counts?"

"And old Humporley taught you to swim. To say nothing of Mrs. Cumberquick's late spouse, who from all accounts instructed you in the gentle art of poaching!"

"Oh, well, she works in the house — scrubs. Have you ever seen her hands? How would you like to have hands like those?" he asked her, his eyes twinkling. "Humporley can't work — he's too rheumatic."

"He's taking a cure at the *Hunted Stag*."

"You're a hard-hearted young woman!"



"I'm your bailiff now." She smiled proudly. "That makes a difference. As Lady Gull impressed on me in her dignified way: 'Business is business'!"

"But I'm not a business man," said Mark. His voice was faintly arrogant. "One has to be brought up to it to know how to turn the screw."

"Every one should be brought up to work."

"Like you?" He surveyed her wickedly.

"I'm a woman." She tried to look severe.

"So's Henrietta. At least —" He smiled

"I'll take your word for it," laughed Sabine.



## CHAPTER XVI

SABINE sat at the far end of the hazel grove looking over the combe. It was a favourite haunt of hers when she wished to be undisturbed.

A pair of beech trees fringed the wood, their roots emerging from a bank beneath which a little brook, wide in the rainy season but now a mere trickle of water, held its own manfully against the encroachment of thirsty plants, deep blue forget-me-not, meadow-sweet and ragged robin and, in a patch beyond the shade, the insolent thrust of the purple flags.

It was that still hour of the day which follows the setting of the sun, the parched earth calling for dew. A light wind stole up from the sea, stirring the burdened spikes of gorse, and Sabine raised her head for a moment from a letter she was reading to enjoy its cool touch on her face. She was in a rebellious mood. There had come a lull in active work and with it the full realization of the parting that lay ahead. Christabel's letter, on her knee, full of youthful enthusiasm, straining towards the unknown future, seemed to add the last touch to her own hopelessness. Three weeks had passed swiftly; in another five Mark would be gone and life become a perpetual twilight, merging into the darkness of fear.

The breeze fluttered the page in her hand. She smoothed it out impatiently and returned to its contents.

Christabel was still in England, her leave prolonged in consequence of a sharp attack of measles that prevailed in the village.

She was out of quarantine but not yet fit for work, and the doctor had ordered a change by the sea. She proposed to join her friend Sophie at Ventnor for a week or so, had "wangled" this,



so she wrote, with the connivance of Mrs. Liddell. The letter ran on hurriedly:

*You'll be glad to hear that things there are decidedly for the better. Laura, the married sister living in California, has offered to make a home for Sophie. Her husband is a fruit farmer, a match which the Liddells opposed at the time as they didn't think it good enough. Anyhow they've turned up trumps and Sophie is independent, so there's no question of charity. The dead man left a will in her favour and she has a small, settled income. It was rather quaint when this fact came out. Mrs. Liddell was divided between a fear of further scandal and relief over money matters. She has always been fond of the dibs. So now she's backing up her daughter on the grounds that the wind-fall is his "atonement"!*

*Sophie is to stay at Ventnor until things are quite settled, then she sails for the New World. She's going to adopt his second name and call herself "Mrs. Vernon" and no one will know out there. She'll be one of the crowd of war widows. Naturally she doesn't want to make it unpleasant for her sister — or for her people at home. They've kept the facts very dark. She's supposed to be suffering from a 'nervous break-down' — that useful complaint! — and is not allowed visitors. They're packing her off with a nurse to some quiet rooms in Ventnor next week and I'm to join her. Can't you come and make a third? Do! It would be so jolly. And I know you'd be good to Sophie. You'd like her too — she's such a dear! Awfully brave and going to make the best of things for the child's sake. In a sense she is really a war widow. Do you understand? I can't explain. But when I see some of the married women whose husbands are at the Front, and the way they amuse themselves with men and get off scot free, knowing what they'd say of Sophie if they heard her history, it makes me pretty scornful. You can do anything when you're married, but the whole world's down on a girl! It's not fair play, is it, Sabine? You're so broad-minded — it's a relief to write to you. In this place I feel eternally pent up, and*



*Elsie is like a cold sponge — no, that's too invigorating! A tepid one — Arthur's the soap! He kisses Elsie on her forehead with an air of benediction and Elsie blushes. They call that love! Now, do come to Ventnor. Wire — I'll see about rooms.*

*Your devoted,  
C. L.*

A “war widow”? Suddenly there flashed up in Sabine's mind a vivid picture of herself in Sophie's place, waiting, hoping — remembering long hours of love.

It caught her vivid imagination and her fancy played around it, linking the loose threads together and weaving a forbidden romance. It seemed perilously simple. To have one perfect month with Mark, in defiance of the world's opinion but hidden away from curious glances; to give without stinting to the man who had been cheated of happiness.

Her breath came quickly at the thought. She leaned forward, clasping her knees, her eyes fixed on the dark blue stripe dividing calm sea and sky as the light waned on the horizon. Perhaps — she remembered Sophie and the link between the living and dead — he might not be the last Vallance.

Breaking across her line of vision, between the patches of vivid gorse, came a tall, virile figure with an easy stride, a small boy perched aloft on his shoulders, homeward bound over the combe.

Mark — and the miracle of a child! Her dream had materialized. She was swept by a wave of superstition, for it seemed like a sign against the heavens.

The glimmer of her white skirt on the russet of the bank caught his attention. He changed his course. She could see now one brown hand clasping the urchin's bare knee. The foot beneath was roughly bandaged with a folded handkerchief, but the small boy was in his glory. His shrill voice reached her ears and an answering laugh from the man. As he came nearer, he hailed Sabine:

“Is your Dilly in? Here's a patient for her. I found him in the Sandy Lane pretending to be a wounded soldier. Eh, Tommy?”



The victim giggled. Mark stopped at the edge of the brook and stood there looking across at Sabine.

"Some careless fool had broken a bottle and left the pieces in the sand. This hero cut his foot on one, so I'm giving him a lift home — can't have a good man lamed! I thought if Dillon could bathe the place and make sure the glass was out, with the help, perhaps, of a slice of cake, he'd be fit for active service again." He glanced up at the little brown face, but the child had suddenly turned bashful. "Cut his tongue out too," said Mark. "It's been a pretty heavy engagement. He's a sergeant — so he tells me — in the Liddingcombe Light Foot. I daresay you've seen the regiment drilling?"

"I have." Sabine smiled at the pair. "Give him to me?" She held out her arms, her eyes full of a wistful light.

"No, I'm going to take him to Dillon. Shall I find you here when I come back?"

She nodded her head.

He hesitated, watching her narrowly.

"Shall I come back?"

"Yes — if you like. It's cooler now the sun's gone down." She was struggling against a curious shyness that held an under-current of guilt.

"Quite cool." He looked mischievous. "I noticed it. Come along, Tommy! We're dismissed for the present. Salute the lady!"

The child obeyed with a solemn, military gesture of his grimy little paw.

"That's right. Now for hospital! Au revoir, Miss Fane."

His voice was light, but as he passed her, striding the ditch, he glanced sideways. She read in his face a silent appeal. There was some fresh trouble.

"I'll be here." She smiled gravely.

She watched him pass along the path, pause and lift the boy down, mindful of the low branches, settling him easily in his arms. The action betrayed his love for children and the experience gained by his brief fatherhood.



The lint-coloured head lay cradled in the crook of his left arm, his right was passed beneath the knees, the hand supporting the small thigh against the patched, tattered breeches. For the child was of the poorest class. Sabine knew him well by sight, one of a rough brood in a broken-down cottage by the sea, hardy and unwashed, struggling up like the wiry pinks in the clefts of the rocks, bare-footed, dodging cuffs from the over-worked mother yet happy in his free life, filled with the hope of adventure.

It was for this younger generation that men were dying across the water; that Mark before many months had passed would take his chance with the rest.

If he never returned?

She clenched her hands in sudden anger and rebellion. There was no glimmer of consolation; she would have sent him to his death. Sophie could feel a secret triumph sting through her lonely shame. Those memories were not for Sabine. Unless — There was still a month left. The temptation rose, overpowering.

She stared out through the deepening twilight, facing it deliberately, weighing ideals in the balance, building the frail edifice of hope and desire, stone on stone. It might have been Fane himself, planning an amorous adventure, with the same warm light in his dark eyes and obstinate upward tilt of his chin.

A war widow? Married in haste to a soldier met on leave. How and where? At Ventnor, of course, in her visit to the two girls. With a honeymoon spent at Niton, in that discreet little hotel where she had once stayed with her father during a yachting cruise, land-bound by stormy weather.

Her cheeks warmed as she saw herself with Mark in that peaceful village, out of the track of noisy tourists yet in touch with the larger town which would serve her for a postal address. Sophie would forward letters.

She began to envisage the phantom "husband"; an Australian with no links in this country but a desire to see the spot where his mother had been born. The growing enthusiasm for the fighting powers of his splendid race, that had strengthened the tie of common blood and held England proud and grateful, would



add romance to the hasty match, a common occurrence in these times. Yes, he must be an Australian. She felt an absurd fondness for this mythical and gallant partner.

It would be simple later on to dispose of him after some sharp engagement in which the Colonial forces suffered, ever in the van of action. For who would study the lengthy lists to verify a trooper's death, save those painfully concerned? As a widow, too, her position would be strengthened at Liddingcombe. It would give her the right to remain on as housekeeper if Mark returned, wounded, or at the end of the war. In the fishing village a widow stood for all that was respectable.

The question of letters cropped up. The "husband" must write from the Front, to bolster up the thin story. She knit her brows. It would be easy once Mark's training were over and he "somewhere in France." He could use his left hand as a blind to the household and the post-mistress. But, meanwhile, how could she fill the gap?

Then she remembered. For some months past she had corresponded fitfully with a servant long in her father's employment, a "lonely soldier," without relations, and grateful for her interest. She could send him envelopes for his replies, addressed by Mark! She smiled at the thought. It was comical to picture Walters, that sedate valet, impersonating unconsciously Fane's "son-in-law." The man had complained latterly of being moved on out of reach of a Y. M. C. A. hut and apologizing for scraps of paper. She would keep him well supplied! Mark, later, could alternate his two methods of handwriting and amplify his correspondence. That gift of his would come in useful. Her active brain forged ahead searching for fresh flaws in the scheme.

Dillon? She bit her lip.

It would be hard to deceive the trustful old woman. In due course she might be told, but not at first—it was too risky. Dimly she saw the faithful soul bound to her by a further tie. If Sophie's fate should be Sabine's, she could count upon Dillon. The old nurse would never be proof against the charm of a little child; she would pass on her allegiance. Dillon was no obstacle.



Granted this, what stood in the way?

Only Sabine's principles. She knew herself to be stronger than Mark. He would give way under pressure. And what *were* "principles"? How far did her moral code depend on conviction as divorced from custom? She set herself to this serious problem.

She had known so many men and women honourable in the eyes of the world and yet frail where love was concerned. There was her father, for instance, faithful during her mother's lifetime, scrupulous in his business dealings, just, sensitive and proud, yet unprincipled from an ethical standpoint where a woman roused his passion. Could one set down rigid rules of right and wrong irrespective of circumstance and temperament? No harm had seemed to follow Fane's varied fond adventures. Every one had loved the man and he had died like a saint. Even Dillon could not condemn him.

Fane had sometimes profited by his conquests — a moot point — whereas Sabine had nothing to gain. And nothing to lose — so it seemed to her — but the knowledge of her virtue. Religion she scored out. Between Dillon's quaint mixture of superstition and prayers to the Saints and her father's cheerful agnosticism, Sabine's creed amounted to a pleasant belief that the Church of England was suitable to the climate! It ran side by side with the Law, a negative source of good in the land, but void of any inspiration. The fact, unrealized abroad, of the constant schisms in the camp, with the remainder of tin chapels in every village she visited, pointed the last disillusion. There were no such cracks in the older Faith. What was wrong with the Church of England, when clever thinkers broke away, swelling the ranks of the Non-conformists, and brilliant preachers constantly were gathered into the folds of Rome? Some worm lay at the root. She had always hated half-measures, and the complacency of the clergy she had met, in view of their crumbling powers, filled her with contempt. Why couldn't they take the matter in hand, figure out their differences, and weld the whole Church into one, a living force in the land?



No, the religion of her childhood, taught on the traditional plan of blindly accepting mysteries as a proof of her "belief," could not affect her judgment now.

The choice stood clear in her mind. An unlawful union, sanctified by a love of which she held no doubt, at the cost of her honour — that "breathless moment" seized by Sophie — or the dragging, unsatisfied days with little hope in the future should Mark survive the war. Kitchener had said that it would last three years. Sabine shuddered. Time, inexorable, held no brief for procrastinating lovers.

"Youth's years how few; age how sure." The words of the long-dead Emperor rose up in her mind. Beauty and the joy of life would pass like the stocks and tobacco flowers, leaving no poignant perfume behind. Life, at its best, lay in gripping the present, fearless of the past and future.

A twig snapped in the silent wood followed by the sound of steps.

"Well?" Mark sat down beside her. "Dilly's looking after the boy. I'll take him home later on. A nice child — they're not always grateful. Why should they be?" It was evident that he was voicing his passing thoughts. "They've nothing, and it must seem to them that we have everything we want! Just through the accident of birth."

"Is it an accident?" Her eyes ran over him.

"I suppose so. Though it works both ways. I've met many a labouring man who was more truly a gentleman than others in my own class. Birth's not everything, but I think that refined surroundings and the necessity — overlooked sometimes, I'll admit — to set an example of decency — that's not the word, but you understand? — through succeeding generations *must* tell in the end. It narrows down to an ideal: to do nothing unworthy of your name — the feeling that a regiment has when it sees its tattered flags. It's not only out for loot. That's where I mistrust the new class that's springing up, the Gull class. Profiteers!" His voice was scornful. "They've won their position by sharp methods. I'd far sooner see old Sam from the *Hunted Stag* at



Lidding St. Mary — for all his occasional love of the bottle! He's genuine. He'd play fair. I heard a story this morning that simply made my blood boil. You know old Wooten — that white-haired man who potters round the churchyard and whips up truants for the choir? Well, Gull engaged him to help in the mowing — they're short-handed just now — bargained with him for three days at seven and sixpence, and *kept him at it!* He paid Wooten in half-crowns. Coming home the poor old chap dropped one of them through a hole in his trousers' pocket. Early on Sunday morning he searched for it along the drive, without result, and met Gull coming back from communion. He explained dolefully what had happened. Said Gull: 'Why, that must have been *your* half-crown I picked up near the Lodge'? He seemed highly amused at it. Wooten waited patiently and what do you think Gull did?"

"Returned it of course."

"Not he! Explained that he'd put it in the plate and followed it up by remarking that the offertory was for the poor, so Wooten would still benefit by it! That's his idea of humour. He never gave the old chap a penny, but told him to be off home and see that his wife mended his trousers. *Swine!*" Mark looked murderous.

"It's unbelievable!" said Sabine. "A case of pure robbery." She paused for a moment, then added softly, "I hope you've not forgotten, Mark, to enter that half-crown in the accounts."

He gave her a guilty side glance.

"Or five shillings?" she persisted.

She met his eyes and they both laughed.

"The fact was I hadn't change." His voice was apologetic. "Well, dash it all, I've money now. Though I need it." His face darkened.

"Tell me?" She slipped a hand into his.

"I'm worried. I don't know what to do. I had a letter this afternoon from my wife's sister — Sybil never writes direct. The old story — short of funds. Of course they've seen my aunt's death in the papers." He stopped abruptly.



"But you won't be imposed upon," said Sabine.

"I don't know. There's a reason. It seems that my wife is ill. Her sister puts the matter bluntly. Sybil has taken badly to drugs. It's been going on for several years and now she's in a hopeless state. The doctor attending her wants her to go into a home as the only chance. So the *sister* says! She has left the stage and run into debt heavily. It means my clearing everything up and paying the cost of the cure. If it's true — that's the question? I think I shall run up to town and look into matters myself. But I dread it." His voice sank. "I've never set eyes upon Sybil since the week that the boy died. That child to-day brought it back."

"My dear." She smoothed the hand in her own that tightened its hold gratefully.

He stared ahead over the gorse.

"He died in my arms — I was all alone. I'd sent the servant for a doctor and the little nurse to the theatre to beg my wife to return as soon as she could get away. She had the message right enough, but she went on to a supper party and never turned up till all was over. I was at my wit's end. The doctor was out at a confinement — they didn't know when he'd be back — and the maid went in search of another. He came too late. He told me that a hot bath might have saved the boy. His *mother* would have known — but she didn't care! Her one idea was to win pleasure and admiration. I held her responsible for his death. I do still. And now I'm asked to give her a last chance — prolong her life, at *any* cost." A bitter smile curved his lips. "Considering what her 'happy release' would mean to me, it's almost funny!"

"To *us*," said Sabine. She stiffened, vexed, watching his face. "You'll agree?"

"Yes, if the story's true. I've got to. She's my wife."

He waited. No word came from the tense figure by his side. At last he gave her a nervous glance.

"You don't approve?" His voice was anxious.

"Yes, I approve. On one condition."



He saw the colour steal up to the roots of her shining hair. Her eyes fell before his own.

"What condition?"

"I'll tell you later."

He watched her wonderingly, trying to probe her secret thoughts. She seemed miles away from him.

"When will you go up to town?"

He guessed she was planning something. She had the intent expression he knew of old in their work together.

"Not this week — probably next. Why?"

She glanced down at Christabel's letter upon her lap.

"Because I've had an invitation — I was wondering if you could spare me. To stay with two girls at Ventnor. It's a curious history. I'd like to tell you" — she hesitated — "although I mustn't mention names. I want to have your opinion."

Mark breathed a sigh of relief. So this was what was troubling her.

"Go ahead. I'll listen."

Absently he gathered up the beech-nuts from last year that lay in the soft dust of the bank, as Sabine, carefully choosing her words, embarked on Sophie's tragic adventure. Once he raised his head, frowning, when Sabine laid stress upon the dead soldier's love for the girl, then checked himself:

"He's killed, you say?"

She guessed his unspoken verdict.

At last she paused, the story ended, and stole a furtive glance at Mark, cracking the brittle nuts with their perished kernels methodically between his strong brown fingers.

"Do you blame her?"

"I'd blame him if the poor chap were alive." He spoke with a man's reluctance to convict one of his own sex in a matter of morality, avoiding comment on the girl.

"Well, *I* don't. She has something left. Memories to last her days — and the one desire of her life."

He was startled by the sombre passion that rang out in her voice. He temporized:



"It's a dreadful position — for a young girl. Alone like that."

A short silence followed his words. Sabine was mustering all her courage. Mark, deeply uncomfortable, was longing to change the subject, aware of its subtle inference. She heard the crisp crack of a nut split open, then his explanation.

"Hullo! Here's a Philippine. That's lucky, isn't it?" He passed the half across to her. "You must wish," and laid it in her palm.

She closed her eyes. After a second she whispered:

"I *have* wished."

He looked at her curiously.

"Tell me what?"

"Shall I?" Her heart was racing with fear and hope. The shrivelled kernel shook in her hand.

Her mood seemed to infect Mark.

"Yes." He leaned nearer her, unconsciously yielding to the charm of her close proximity, the faint scent of her hair and the subtle air of excitement about her. He studied her averted face, the eyes downcast, a slight droop at the corners of her beautiful mouth.

Her eyelids quivered. With an effort she raised them and gave him a desperate glance.

"I wished — that I might be like Sophie." The name slipped out, unheeded by both. "Give all for love and pay the cost."

"Sabine! For God's sake, don't!" The full meaning of the speech swung him away from her in a swift recoil from temptation.

She saw it. In her wounded pride a flicker of temper rose to her aid.

"You're afraid!" Her face was defiant. "If you *really* loved me, you'd understand. It's the only way — the only proof that a woman can give — the last proof." As she saw the longing and pain in his eyes her brief anger died out. Her hand clutched at his sleeve, the words poured forth tempestuously. "Do you think that I don't know how you suffer? But you'd never suggest such a thing yourself — you couldn't! It would be an insult.



I can, and I dare! I love you with all my body and soul. I can't let you go like this, cheated" — she choked — "to your death. But if you went with memories, with the knowledge of how much I cared — Oh Mark!" She held out her arms, her whole attitude a prayer. "I *can't* —" The tears poured down.

He caught her to him hungrily.

"Sabine, hush! Sabine, dearest —"

Her wet cheek pressed to his own, her lips close to his ear, she breathed between her stifled sobs:

"You can't refuse! You *can't* shame me! That's what I meant — just now. When you spoke about *her* and — prolonging her life. A condition — to — my approval. You love me better — it's only fair! One unforgettable month — together."

. . . . .  
It was dark when they reached the house. Mark turned, outside the porch, and looked up at the sky where the first pale stars of night quivered against their rich madonna's cloak.

"What a blue evening!" He drew in his breath. "I shall never forget it. Shall you, Sabine?"

"No. It's the first of our memories." She leaned against him, drinking in the utter peace of the scene that found an echo in her heart: the lawn with its shadows of indigo and the long grey wall that slipped away like a furtive ghost into space.

A little breeze sang through the leaves of the copper beech and from afar came the endless murmur of the sea.

"Shall you ever regret it?" His voice was unsteady.

"Never." She lifted her dark eyes in which a hint of tender triumph shone through the traces of her tears. "It is the Enchanted Garden to-night. It will be, to the end of my life."

He bent his head, studying her, conquered but still counting the cost.

"It's wrong, Sabine. You know that?"

She nodded, a faint smile on her lips.

"Ethically — I'll admit it. But it's right from my point of view. It's not an impulsive act of folly. It can hurt no one but ourselves."



"It might."

Before he could say more, a soft palm covered his lips.

"You're not to! You're spoiling my blue evening."

Gently he took her hand away.

"If only I'm not spoiling your life?"

"You're crowning it." She had the last word.



## BOOK II







## CHAPTER XVII

SABINE sat on the sandy floor of Crusoe's cave, steeped in sunshine that was rapidly drying her bathing-dress and was almost too hot for her bare knees. She curled her legs up under her and gazed down at the water, so translucent that she could see, on the shelf of rock below, some barnacles and a fragment of glass worn smooth by the waves, gleaming like the palest jade.

It was close upon the noontide hour; for rarely now did she bathe before breakfast, lacking the spur of Mark's presence. Nearly three years had elapsed since she had parted from him at Niton before he trained for a commission, and in many ways her habits had changed. With the birth of her child in the following spring she had said farewell to her girlhood, and although, at times, her high spirits brought with them a note of youth her manner was that of a married woman with its assured dignity.

Her sophistry had increased and a certain latent love of ease. Mark was now a wealthy man through an accident based on the fortunes of war, and Sabine shared his prosperity. A distant cousin of his mother's, the widow of a well-known banker, had lost her two sons in a week during the struggle round Ypres. She had survived them barely a year, leaving a will in Mark's favour which placed him in a better position than he had known in the days of his youth and brief squirehood at Lidding St. Mary.

His first act had been to settle a generous portion upon Sabine, making her independent. She had strongly demurred at this, but the little son without a right to the name he bore was an argument which carried weight, and, besides this, her long course of deception, bolstered up by success, had sapped the foundations of



her pride insidiously, without her knowledge. From the hour on which she had decided to challenge recognized moral laws, Luck had stood by her side. She had grown accustomed to the presence of the "fickle jade." Imperceptibly it had lowered the trend of her character, finer in less prosperous days.

Outwardly she was the same, though her attraction had increased and she was conscious of its power. As the widow of an Australian soldier — presumed to have left her a small income — she held now a secure position in the little fishing-village, recognized not as "housekeeper" to the family so much revered but, with the new surprising changes in feminine enterprise, as the "man of business" on the estate. Backed up by Mark's money and her own genius for management, she had effected many reforms for the well-being of the tenants. Her beauty, now in its prime, her ready tact and experience, with a sympathy for real distress that rarely impinged on her judgment, had won her the loyalty of the people. She had quietly filled Miss Vallance's place.

She accepted respect as her due, beating down the voice of conscience in its earlier manifestations, convincing herself that the results of her secret lapse from a high standard had been justified by events. Many a wrinkled old woman dropped her a curtsy as she passed, with a pitying thought for the young "widow" and, had she chosen to accept the slow but increasing advances of the gentry round Liddingcombe, she could have mixed with them as an equal. But here wisdom held her back. She looked ahead to Mark's return. The Cathcarts were the only exception to the rule she had formed, and since Babs had married young Mallison and followed him to join a friend engaged in war work at Hâvre, even this intimacy had lapsed. Obscure, she stood a better chance of avoiding awkward explanations.

This summer, however, had brought a change and congenial companionship in the shape of Elizma Taverner (a friend of her girlhood days) with the famous surgeon whom she had married, well-known as a leader in eugenics. They had taken a small house near the river. Taverner had been overworking and was



badly in need of a rest and they both loved the quiet place, living an open air life and wrapped up in their only child, a beautiful boy in his fourth summer.

Elizma was very musical, a strong link between her and Sabine that revived pleasant memories of their meeting at Viareggio. Introduced by a Roman friend, Sabine had speedily become *persona grata* at the villa next to theirs, leased by Miss Lee to avoid the hot months at Fiesole where the pair lived for most of the year. Even in those days, Elizma's talent for the violin had marked her out among amateurs, and Sabine, fond of accompanying, a brilliant and clever pianist, had proved a decided acquisition in the small English colony. It was through her account of Liddingcombe that the Taverners had chosen the place for their summer holiday, avoiding Polrennick, Elizma's property in Cornwall which was in the hands of workmen.

Sabine's child had been born in town at a nursing-home recommended by these old friends of hers, to whom she had turned for advice. Orde Taverner's influence had secured her the best of attention, and in the days of convalescence Elizma, a near neighbour, had loaded little kindnesses upon the young and lonely mother. She knew nothing of the real facts. The story told seemed a little mysterious after the old life of the Fanes, but she had learnt the wisdom of silence. A very broad-minded woman, she had been through bitter times herself, hardly used as a child under the stern rule of Miss Lee. The romance of her sudden marriage had brought disaster in its wake, now happily tided over.\*

This morning she had bathed with Sabine and was now in possession of the tent whilst the other, loth to leave the water, had swum out to her favourite haunt. The two children were with their nurses in the shade of the rocks; Dillon, and a certain Brigitta whom Elizma had brought from Italy, a faithful and devoted creature with a wrinkled olive skin and expressive eyes, black as sloes. Between her and the Irishwoman a quaint friendship was strengthening, in defiance of the barrier caused by Brig-

\* See *The Individual*, by the same author.



itta's broken English and Dillon's strange turns of speech. The religion they shared was a link between them, tinged in the Italian's case by a humour that verged on the scepticism so often patent among Tuscans. It found an echo in the naïve superstition and shrewd common sense of the old Irish nurse. They both had a habit of "risking" a prayer to their favourite Saint without any blame being attached if it met with no response. The Saints, too, must have "days off," wearied by human intercession and the selfishness of their clients. It was like "*il Lotto*," Brigitta explained, well worth the constant gamble on the chance of a number turning up!

Dillon had been to Italy many times with the Fanes and was therefore less insular and free from local prejudice than most of the Taverners' household. Brigitta found her "*simpatica*." Dillon, returning the compliment, told her she was a "woman of sinse." They both were devoted to their charges. Elizma's child, little "Roger-Lee," with his red-gold curls and sunny smile, was a good foil for "Anthony," as Sabine had named her son.

"Short for Mark Anthony," she had written to his father, remembering his school nickname.

He could walk now without help, a rather serious little person with his mother's dark colouring and the clean-cut limbs of Mark. Roger-Lee would prattle gaily, and Anthony would study him with wonder and a slight mistrust, willing to play *when he chose*, but resenting familiarity! They were a source of amusement together to their interested mothers, each secretly admiring the superior points of her offspring. Already in the younger child was a faint trace of that arrogance which Sabine had approved in Mark. He could be led but never driven. Dillon was his humble slave.

She knew the whole story now — had learnt it in the days of weakness when Sabine had needed her full comfort. The moment had been inauspicious for any tragic condemnation and, little by little, habit had worked its accustomed spell, blurring the moral issue. She was reconciled to the position, although she still deplored the sin. Undoubtedly Mark's windfall and his generosity



to her "darling" had not been without effect. Poverty was not fit for a Fane! Almost she persuaded herself that Sabine was in truth a widow, that "Mrs. Cruikshank" she was called and in which name she drew her money. Success in the wild adventure had seemed to invest it with a certain quality of approval. The Saints had once been mortal themselves and her dear one had "loved much." If only the unwanted wife could be wiped out — This was her prayer! She held no doubt of Mark's behaviour. He would marry the woman he had wronged. Meanwhile there was the secret to guard and the little child whom Dillon adored, dependent on her, as Sabine had been, largely for its health and comfort.

Across the stretch of water and beach, Sabine could see the holland umbrella, suggesting a giant mushroom, Dillon's body the solid stem. Anthony, with his petticoats bunched into small drawers of check-patterned waterproof, was holding out a wooden spade with an air of patience whilst Roger-Lee laid down laws of architecture as applied to modern forts. A lop-sided eminence of sand, with a moat running round it, and one shrimp, that *would* hop out but still survived constant capture, pointed the argument.

Sabine smiled, watching them and twisted sideways so that the sun might penetrate her bathing-dress where it clung to her shoulders. It was in black spun silk. Everything she wore now was of the finest quality, though she still dressed in a simple style suitable to her country life. But her love of luxury had deepened and the intimate care of her body.

Her thoughts drifted towards Mark. Although she was very fond of her child, maternity had not taken the place of her passionate love for the father. Essentially a man's woman, she fretted against his prolonged absence and the caution he showed in his censored letters that left her dissatisfied and hungry.

Mark's delight in the birth of a son had been shadowed by a cloud of remorse. He could not, like the woman he worshipped, live entirely in the present. He was responsible for the child and he foresaw the days ahead when Anthony, a grown man, must



be told the sordid story. Even if his wife died, leaving him free to marry Sabine, he could not wipe out the wrong done to his own flesh and blood.

This point of view had somewhat dimmed their one meeting since Anthony's birth. After eighteen months in France, Mark had obtained leave. Sabine had met him at Southampton and the pair had gone direct to Niton, back to the quiet little hotel full of poignant memories. He kept his leave a profound secret. No one in Liddingcombe knew of it save Dillon, left in charge of the tiny baby. It seemed to the pair too risky to include the latter in the scheme, and Mark had never seen his son. Besides this, both felt that the presence of the old woman, apprehensive and disapproving, would mar the joy of their reunion and tarnish it by a feeling of guilt.

Sabine was thinking of Niton now, the little hotel covered with creepers tucked away behind its lawn, above the narrow, white road and looking down the slope to the sea, away from the sleepy village and its strange link with civilization in the shape of a Marconi station on a desolate spur of sandy meadow. This respite from her loneliness and her constant fear for Mark's safety had not been wholly a success. It had been a mistake, she decided, to have gone back to the same place, notwithstanding the pleasant welcome they had received from the owners. Mark's love was as deep as ever, yet she divined a difference. It was no longer a breathless adventure on the topmost wave of passion; it was more like married life. The war had left its sign manual on him. He seemed older, slightly hardened, and prone to fits of abstraction after the first transports had passed. His one great ambition now, if he came unscathed through Armageddon, was to buy back Lidding St. Mary, by hook or by crook, from the Gulls. Sabine secretly dreaded the thought. Surrounded by a houseful of servants it would be very difficult to keep up her present farce, and a check to all intimacy. Unless —

Whereas, two years before, she would have shrunk from the bare thought of an accepted position as "mistress," she now calmly envisaged it. He would not be the first Vallance who



had given up the dower house to a frail and fair neighbour in defiance of moral opinion. He could adopt Anthony and make the child his heir, since the entail had been broken. Money and influence worked marvels. Time, too, was a great healer. Many illustrious men had been the result of illegal unions. If it came to that — Sabine smiled — several ducal families in the land owed their position to a fancy of royalty long departed, entailing the bar sinister in their protégée's "noble" coat of arms! Such facts could be lived down and the war had slain Mrs. Grundy. Mark was very popular and everyone pitied him for his marriage and the loss of his little son. There was no need for open scandal. She would not live under the same roof but continue to act as his bailiff. She could face rebuffs — for the sake of the child.

She clutched the excuse desperately, aware of the shallowness of it, yet persuading herself it was the truth — the main motive of the scheme. Yes, it would be for Anthony. Some day, he would thank her.

Sitting there in the sunshine and the glow of her perfect health, her beautiful body lax from swimming, her sleek head against the wall of the cave with the dark shadows behind her, she looked like a Bartolozzi print of a Venus cast up by the sea, lost in voluptuous dreams.

At length, with a start, she roused herself. Time was flying. From the tent, Elizma had emerged, waving, and was now playing with the children. They must all go home to lunch. Afterwards, in the warm hours when the little folk took their siesta, Elizma was coming round with her fiddle to the cool old drawing-room and they were to try a new sonata before tea in the garden. Life was good. Sabine stretched her white arms above her head with a luxurious yawn, then slipped down into the water, warm to her skin, yet fresh and buoyant, yielding to her lazy stroke as she swam out and headed shoreward.

The tide had turned. The swell of a wave caught her and she gave herself up to its wilful caress, conscious that it altered her course but utterly unresisting. Thus Mark had swept her out into the full flood of emotion, far from the land-marks of her



youth. Whither? She smiled, with the sun in her eyes that filled the air with a golden haze. She left the answer to the gods, recklessly happy in the present. For Mark was safe, he still loved her, and he always would — she knew her power! Youth was theirs and the joy of life. She did not regret the “breathless moment.”



## CHAPTER XVIII

**J**OHNSON — she still clung to the name although married to her sergeant — opened the drawing-room door wide with a flounce of her black alpaca skirt and announced unwillingly: “Lady Gull!”

Sabine gave an impatient “Oh,” drowned in a deep-toned chord from Elizma’s violin, with a swift side-glance that spoke volumes, then rose from her seat.

“I ’ope I’m not interrupting?” said her ladyship genially. “I’m not going to *stay*.” She held out her hand, fatter than ever, with little knobs where her rings strained the tight kid, firmly clasped at the wrist with a diamond and ruby bracelet. “How d’ye do? Isn’t it ’ot!”

She sank down on the sofa and sidled forward to the edge, aware of the sharp point of her steels. Henrietta had insisted lately on longer and firmer corsets, in the face of that tendency which her mother referred to as “spreading.” She raised her *lorgnette* and stared at Elizma.

Sabine introduced the pair.

“I’ve seen you about,” said Lady Gull with a condescending smile. “I ’ear you’ve taken the Ferry ’ouse. I should think you’d find it rather poky this weather — and no bathroom!”

“We bathe in the sea,” said Elizma. She was placing her violin in its light, crocodile case, drawing a silk scarf across the beautiful old varnish and then its quilted satin cover, with “P. G.” embroidered in gold.

“Oh, well,” said Lady Gull, “I suppose it’s all ’abit really. Now *I’m* accustomed to big rooms.”

Into Elizma’s golden eyes, the best feature of her face with



their dark pupils and long lashes, stole a little imp of mischief. This solid lady promised sport.

"I expect it is," she agreed suavely.

Lady Gull's tone became still more patronizing.

"You take a lot of care of your fiddle. Is it a good instrument?"

She was studying curiously the graceful figure by the piano in what she privately decided was an "outlandish get-up."

For Elizma wore a narrow dress of cretonne, the pattern clusters of apple blossom, that fell straight from its yoke and was cut in a wide square at the throat — "The same stuff as I use for curtains," her ladyship thought scornfully — with a broad hem of deep blue matching the lapis lazuli beads that swung to her waist and the long drops in her small, well-shaped ears. She had gone back, at Taverner's wish, to the cropped hair of her girlhood, cut straight across her brows and at the nape of the neck where it curled inward after the style familiar in mediaeval pictures. It suited her pale, pointed face with its little straight nose and vivid mouth.

She leaned up now against the piano like some slim youth, her legs crossed, and answered Lady Gull's question.

"It's a Peter Guarnerius."

She might just as well have mentioned the name of some obscure cheese. Lady Gull was unimpressed, but she risked a guess, recalling the "Peter."

"Oh, *English*? Well, I think you're right. Nowadays one ought to support home produce. Though they do say" — her smile broadened — "that music was 'made in Germany'!" Out came her fat laugh. "They certainly 'ave the best pianos."

"They have." Elizma looked thoughtful. Her glance wandered across to Sabine who was struggling against her inward mirth.

"And yer 'usband's a doctor?" said Lady Gull. "You see, I know *all* about you! It's a small world in these parts. P'raps, now Dr. Stonor's away on 'is 'oliday, Dr. Taverner is here as local teaman?"



A faint sound came from Sabine, promptly turned into a cough, but Elizma's expression was almost sad.

"No," she said regretfully. "It wouldn't be any use. Orde knows nothing about tea — although he likes good coffee."

Lady Gull stared at her.

"You don't understand! It's the expression used when one doctor works for another — takes his practice, for a bit. I should 'ave thought you would 'ave known."

"Oh, I see. Unluckily my husband is a surgeon. So we can't get our holidays that way. He is down here for a rest. He has been doing some army work in addition to his private practice. Otherwise we should go to Polrennick, our little corner in the wilds, but I wanted a thorough change for him."

Sabine joined in the conversation.

"They'll miss you in Cornwall."

"They're too busy." Elizma smiled. "The place is full of Belgian nuns — poor souls, driven from their country! The house suits them, because of the chapel. The old priest who was there in my aunt's time is still with us — a godsend! He sees to everything and is reconciled at last with the vicar, under the new fortunes of war. But now we have another scheme. The nuns are in the east wing, chiefly a nursing sisterhood, and we want to turn the rest of the house into a convalescent home for nervous cases — such as shell shock — *after* they're discharged. The nuns are delighted and promise to help. They can do the simple nursing required and of course we shall have a resident doctor who will work under Orde. It will last too, when the war's over. Anyhow, for some time. Meanwhile he'll run down at intervals. That's the idea."

Lady Gull had been holding her breath, ready to burst in. She took advantage of the pause.

"But it must be quite a *big* place?"

"It's straggling," said Elizma simply.

"And 'ow many nuns 'ave you got?" Her ladyship looked aggressive. She was counting the bedrooms at Lidding St. Mary.

"Twenty-five — two died. The result of exposure and ill-



treatment. When we get a couple of dozen men whose diet is an important matter, it will not be so easy. We've no shops in my village and everything, except poultry, milk and vegetables, has to come over by the ferry from a little town across the harbour. I send down a good deal from London."

"It's a fine scheme," said Sabine. "But why *after* they've left the army?"

"Well, it's part of Orde's eugenic work. Few of the cases are really *cured* and they're liable to a relapse if they attempt serious work. They'd make very doubtful parents — that is, in Orde's opinion — and Heaven knows we have enough children mentally deficient! He's interested in shell shock and new methods for dealing with it; 'suggestion' and so forth. Don't think that they will be idle! They will do light work on the land and other healthy forms of employment. Orde has been experimenting with rust-proof wheat and electric culture. Oh, it's all going to be scientific." She gave a sudden, happy laugh. "I'm always afraid that he will try some 'food of the gods' on Roger-Lee!" She sobered down suddenly. "But don't you think it's much better than having a great empty house full of shadows and old pictures?"

This touched Lady Gull in a vulnerable part.

"They'll ruin your carpets!" Her voice was spiteful.

Elizma flashed round on her.

"What does that matter? They're winning the war and losing their lives and their health for us. It's only decent to pay the debt in the nearest way, if you have the means. It's so painfully little one *can* do!"

The visitor looked quite scared at this outbreak. Then she tossed her flower-burdened hat.

"Well, you'd better buy Lidding St. Mary! As an *annexe*!" She mopped her face with her handkerchief, lace-edged and rather scratchy, and launched her bomb-shell in reserve. "We're leaving 'ere — going to sell it." She turned to Sabine, "That's why I called. On a matter of business. If I could see you — alone — for a minute?"



"Certainly." Sabine stood up. "You'll excuse me?" she asked Elizma.

But the latter had taken the broad hint.

"Don't you move! I have to go and give my good man his tea." She gathered up a broad-brimmed hat of blue straw with a crown of the same bright cretonne and tucked the elastic under the thick crop of her hair, then glanced over her shoulder, hearing the click of the garden gate. "Why, here he is — come to fetch me! Good-bye!" She kissed her fingers to Sabine, bowed to Lady Gull and was off through the veranda to meet a tall, grave-looking man whose face lit up at sight of her.

"I'm coming," they heard her cry. Taverner looked surprised. "No, you old duck! Tea at home. You eat too much when you're with Sabine and I can't bear a fat man." She slipped one arm through his and led him off triumphantly, "Pietro," her beloved fiddle, tucked securely under the other.

"Quite the new type," said Lady Gull.

Sabine made no response. She was thinking hard. Here was the chance for which Mark had been praying, his old home on the market. She knew the Gulls' methods well; they would try to extort a fancy price. It roused her latent fighting powers.

"So you're leaving Liddingcombe," she suggested.

"Yes. I'm sick of the country and I never cared for the people about. We've been thinking of it for some time and now Sir Joshua 'as bought a house — a fine 'ouse in 'amilton Place. That's really Park Lane, you know."

Her listener did not dispute it. Lady Gull felt the need to wipe away the faint suspicion of being outshone by Elizma which was still rankling in her mind.

"We shall 'ave a country seat as well, but somewhere much nearer town. I'm thinking of Henrietta. She'll find better chances there. They're more sociable in London and, of course, we shall entertain and give largely to charities. They'll want me badly on committees when they sees Sir Joshua's cheque! 'E's been doing very well lately. But I suppose that most people 'ave made money in this war."



Sabine, surprised, raised her eyebrows.

"Is that so? I understood, with the Excess Profits tax —"

Lady Gull interrupted with a shrewd chuckling laugh.

"There's ways and means!" She looked like a squat, mysterious idol, her feet drawn back under the sofa, and showing a wide expanse of lap.

"Anyhow the professional classes have suffered," Sabine declared.

Her ladyship caught her up.

"But they've *never* made money! Who cares for the professional classes? It's Commerce now, you mark my word. This war 'as killed snobbish distinctions. It's the man 'as can afford to live — and live *well* — that's respected. But to come back to where we started. We were wondering, Sir Joshua and I, if, now that he seems well to do, Mr. Vallance would like to buy back the old place? Of course he'd find it greatly improved, not the tumble-down 'ouse it was."

"But he's at the Front," Sabine objected. "It's hardly the moment, with all the risk and with no one to succeed him, to launch out on a new venture. Land is a doubtful speculation. There's the menace of the next Budget."

Lady Gull looked taken aback.

"It's 'is old 'ome — you forget that! All the sentimental value. *I* think he'd jump at the chance."

"Do you?" Sabine seemed indifferent. "I'm not quite of your opinion. He could have bought Crofton's farm a year ago if he had wished to enlarge his property."

"But that's not the same as Lidding St. Mary," Lady Gull persevered. "It couldn't 'urt to put it before 'im. We *might*, considering everything, give 'im the first refusal. It would seem, some'ow, neighbourly."

"You could write and suggest it," Sabine agreed.

Her ladyship fidgeted.

"Wouldn't it come better from you? Seeing that everything is left — so I understand — in your 'ands." She stooped now to flattery. "Henrietta was saying that she admired the way you



worked as a sort of lady bailiff — considering your upbringing and all. As she says, women do everything now. They're coming at last into their own."

Sabine, who had been leaning back in her armchair, sat upright. Her manner changed perceptibly.

"Am I to understand that this is a definite proposition? If so, of course I will tell Mr. Vallance, and lay Sir Joshua's figures before him."

Lady Gull looked flustered.

"We've not decided — not at present — on the exact p-p-price," she stammered. "If Mr. Vallance would make an offer?"

"Ah —" Sabine relaxed. "I couldn't trouble him like that. He has very little time for letters. It doesn't enter into my province."

"Your *province*!" snapped Lady Gull. "It seems to me you rule this 'ouse pretty well as the mistress."

Sabine rose to her feet.

"And is that all?" she asked coolly.

"There, there," said her ladyship. "I didn't mean what you mean — I *meant* —" She stuck hopelessly. "It's so 'ot — and you go so fast! Just let me get my breath." After a moment she went on. "You want figures?"

"I want a letter from Sir Joshua naming a definite price. I don't think Mr. Vallance would buy unless it seemed a good investment. You must remember his circumstances and the facts of the war. Men out there can hardly afford to look — well, *too* far ahead. It's easier in the present day to buy than to sell property — a large estate like Lidding St. Mary, and in an out-of-the-way county. To begin with, he has disposed of most of the old furniture and everything has risen in price. Then he's alone in the world and he does not require a big house. Still if you'll give me substantial facts — I should want them in Sir Joshua's writing — I will look up the old figures and send Mr. Vallance a copy of them. This will help him to decide."

Lady Gull slowly rose and moved her body from side to side to settle its formidable sheath, one fat hand pressed to her hip where a bent steel had produced a "stitch."



"You're very business-like," she grumbled. "I don't say that Sir Joshua *will* — but I'll talk to him about it."

Sabine smiled and dropped the subject.

"May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks." Lady Gull succumbed to a parting flicker of triumph. "I'm expecting *Lady Mallison*." As she reached the door, she added brightly, "I suppose when I'm gone from 'ere I shall begin to regret it. Every one's so friendly now, since they've 'eard we're on the move."

"I'm not surprised," said Sabine obscurely. "When do you go to town?"

"Soon. That is" — she had made a mistake — "we're in no 'urry. It all depends." With this vague statement, she passed out and Johnson saw her to her carriage.

Sabine heard the horses' hoofs and caught a glimpse of the panama hats above the line of grey wall. A little cloud of dust rose up and descended on the hollyhocks and sunflowers in the border. Then silence fell again.

Here was a further success for Mark. And for herself? A new adventure. She stood there, lost in thought, unconsciously statuesque in her simple white dress that showed the beautiful lines of her figure, her head thrown back, eyes half-closed, conscious of the glare without.

Through it, as the blue gate clicked, came a girl in a compromise between masculine and feminine costume, a post office cap on her head. She saw Sabine on the veranda and produced from her satchel a telegram.

"For yu, m'm." Admiringly her eyes rested on Sabine's feet in their buckskin shoes and silk stockings.

A cold hand seemed to clutch at the older woman's heart. Mark? In a flash she saw him dead, at least wounded mortally.

Her fingers shook as she tore open the fateful yellow envelope and steadied herself to read the message, turning sideways to avoid the gaze of the interested girl.

A long minute ticked away. She raised her head.

"There's no answer."



"Thank yu, m'm."

"Wait a minute." Sabine passed into the house and returned. "There's sixpence for you." Her words came out with an effort. She looked dazed yet radiant.

The telegraph-girl, all forgetful of her cherished uniform, beamed at Sabine and dropped a curtsy.

"It be gude news," she said to herself as she closed the gate carefully. It was irritating not to know the contents of the telegrams she carried, sometimes for miles; so much so that she had discovered a way of breathing heavily on the flap, which with the aid of a hairpin loosened it from the envelope. This involved a shivering suspense, in the dark shelter of some wood and led to much disillusion, such as: "Forwarding goods by 1.30 train," from a fishmonger at Exeter. Rarely the longed-for romance! But once, a Tommy starting on leave had wired his beloved to "name the day." That, at least, had been worth "unsticking!"

Sabine meanwhile had passed upstairs. At the nursery door she tapped gently. Dillon opened it a crack, then came out, finger to lip.

"He's aslape." She referred to Anthony. "And a trouble it's been to get him off." Her eyes narrowed. "What is it, dearie?" She closed the door softly behind her.

"I can't tell you out here." Sabine caught the old nurse by the arm and backed into an empty room. It happened to be the one in which Miss Vallance had passed away, still left as it was, with the inlaid desk on the top of the high chest of drawers. The fact brought a new sense of triumph, of permanence and security. She leaned down to the old woman, watchful and slightly apprehensive.

"Dilly, it's come. She's dead — *at last!* Mark's free to marry me."



## CHAPTER XIX

**I**N the weeks that followed, Sabine's fortune seemed to have reached its zenith. Mark acquired his old home at a reasonable price, mainly through her offices. The house was to be left vacant, in the charge of caretakers, but the fields and gardens kept up and the produce sent to hospitals. Sabine was busy all day long re-engaging men for the grounds, only too glad to serve once more under their old master, most of them veterans remembering the Vallance rule. It leaked out how cleverly Sabine had managed Sir Joshua. Lady Mallison found an excuse for calling one day and openly complimented her. It seemed to the whole county like a reinstatement of their order. For the Gulls had been a sore trial.

Mothers with marriageable daughters began to long for Mark's return. The feeling was shared by the villagers, seeing a prosperous era before them. They redoubled their attentions to Sabine, gossiping a little about her, but pleasantly, speculating on the post she would fill at Lidding St. Mary. No one would turn away a "widder" with her dead soldier's son — certainly not "Mr. Mark." She was more than ever a fixture among them.

Meanwhile the only fly in her honey-pot of contentment was the postponement of Mark's leave, overdue and so deeply desired. The Germans were making their last bid for victory against the troops sorely pressed on the Western front. Few officers could be spared; certainly not in Mark's section. He had been slightly wounded, but not enough to earn him a Blighty and was now back with his men, in splendid health, so he wrote in hurried letters that breathed of love and had slackened a little their vigilance since the death of his wife.

Sabine, playing with her son, wove golden dreams about his



head, ably assisted by old Dillon. She saw her "darling" the Squire's wife — and who more fitted for the position than Fane's daughter? — with herself ruling a sunny nursery up at the fine old house. The Saints indeed had answered her prayers. Surely it was a sign of pardon? There were "sins an' sins," she decided. You had to go back to the cause. In her mistress' case it had been the generous impulses of youth. Mark was a "great gentleman" — you couldn't get away from that! She laid the blame to the "ways of Nature"; then qualified the rebuke. Nature had given them the child; Anthony, with his bright, dark eyes, endearing ways and sudden tempers — for wasn't he just the "little master!" Here she would catch him up and hug him as he struggled in her arms and ordered her to put him down. But, when he raised his rosy face of his own accord and gravely kissed her, the old nurse felt her heart "turn over" — so she expressed herself to Brigitta.

Elizma, too, was interested in the fortunes of the house.

"Will it make any difference to you?" she asked Sabine as they sat on the beach one morning after bathing, letting the sun dry their hair.

"In what way?" Sabine was cautious.

"You'll stay on?"

"Oh, yes. I'm very happy in my work." With averted eyes, she picked up a shell and turned it over in her hand.

"You like Mr. Vallance?" Elizma suggested. She saw the colour steal up under her friend's sunburnt skin and smiled at the indifferent answer:

"He's always been most kind to me."

"So that's it," thought Elizma and changed the subject tactfully.

Late that night she confided her hopes to Taverner, as they lay in bed listening to the song of the river, rippling over its stony course and speeding to its lover, the sea.

"It would be an excellent match for her," Orde agreed. He admired Sabine; above all, her splendid health. "It's a waste for her to remain a widow. She ought to have a dozen children."



"Poor girl!" Elizma laughed. "I think you might let her off with six, especially if they were boys." She gazed out through the open window into the clear starlit night. "I've always wondered about Cruikshank. She doesn't seem to regret him — but you can't tell." Romance caught her. "Listen, Orde. I've an idea."

"No?" He turned on his pillow and watched her with amused eyes. "Out with it — I'm getting sleepy."

"You're *not* to sleep for a few minutes! I believe she has been in love with Vallance all the time. In that nursing-home, once, when she spoke about her husband she called him 'Mark' instead of 'Rupert.' Though I don't wonder — what a name!"

"You scandal-monger," laughed Orde. "You'll be saying the child is Vallance's next!"

"It might be," said Elizma calmly. "If so, that's why she married Cruikshank in such a hurry. It all fits in." She saw that her husband looked annoyed. "No, I don't mean it — not really. But I'm sure there's some mystery. Perhaps one day she'll tell me herself. Poor Sabine! It's awfully hard when one thinks of the Fanes and the way they lived, with their yacht and everything they wanted. He was a charming man too, though they said — Oh, well, that's more gossip! I'll be sensible now and go to sleep. Kiss me good night?" She stretched out an arm and drew his head close to hers. "To-morrow we'll play you that new sonata. It's a dream!" Unconsciously her fingers began to strum a favourite bar on his neck.

"That will do," said Orde firmly, "or you'll have to go and sleep with Pietro."

"Not even jealous!" Elizma sighed. Suddenly she began to quiver with suppressed mirth. "I'm sorry, darling. I was thinking of Lady Gull and of patronizing 'home produce.' I wonder Pietro hadn't a fit! Well, good night for the last time, my beloved 'local teaman'."

To-morrow they had planned a picnic, with Sabine and Anthony, on the moor. The grey pony, getting fat for want of proper exercise, was to convey the children and nurses with the



hamper in charge of Steve, and the older folk were to walk. There was a spot that Sabine knew, not far from the road, where a small quarry had been commenced and abandoned to Nature's tender mercies. Heavily fringed with gorse and bramble, it was like a green opera box commanding the broad open stretch and the distant line of blue sea.

The weather had shown signs of breaking, but a perfect morning rewarded Sabine as she rose, unusually early for her, to get through her duties betimes. It was the day for churning and she went down to the dairy to see that all was in order for the sturdy girl from the village who worked under her supervision. Cream lay yellow on the pans and the place felt deliciously cool with the light filtering through the slats of the green blinds of fitted wood. Mark's handiwork! Sabine's face grew tender at the recollection of the big man in his shirt sleeves bending over his carpenter's bench. How they would work at Lidding St. Mary, restoring the grace of the old house! The first thing that she would attend to was the stripping of that yellow room; peace at last for the vaulted ceiling.

As she came down the passage to the hall, she could see the ancient postman enjoying an early gossip with Johnson. The pair seemed to be interested in one of the letters, and Sabine caught through the still porch the man's last words:

"An old 'un it be, simly."

Hearing her step they separated and Johnson passed into the dining-room, looking a shade confused. She placed the pile of correspondence by the tea-tray, then turned to hunt in the silver drawer for some article, going through the neat lines of spoons and forks, but without result.

It seemed to the other that she was pretending, her busy search an excuse for loitering whilst Sabine read her letters. She spoke to her a little sharply:

"I'm quite ready for breakfast, Johnson. I want to get to the dairy early."

"Yes m'm." In the maid's glance was a gleam of excitement. She hesitated for a moment. Then quietly left the room.



Sabine gathered up the letters.

The two topmost were bills. Beneath this was a post card — she stared — directed to Miss Vallance! But what sent the blood rushing wildly to her heart was the amazing fact that the handwriting was clearly Mark's. The lines sloped unevenly and the address was scribbled in pencil. There was no field postmark on the card.

Suddenly the postman's words returned to her. Was it an old one — that had lain for years in some odd corner? She turned it over breathlessly. The first thing that she saw, stamped in blue ink on the corner was "*Hospital Ship. No charge.*" Next, she was reading, rigid with fear, the pencilled communication:

*Wounded in ankle but all right. Will let you know my hospital later. Writing this in mid-Channel. Don't worry, old lady.*

MARK.

Her first sensation was of relief — an immense relief. Mark was alive. Wounded but "all right" and able to send a lucid message.

"Thank God!" She leaned against the table, for her knees were shaking under her.

Then the mystery of the address returned with redoubled force. Was he "all right"? Perhaps light-headed from fever induced by his wound, or under the spell of some pain-killing drug? The post card must be meant for Sabine. Yet Mark never called her "old lady." It had been a habit of his with Miss Vallance, a sign of good fellowship between them, dropped when she turned severe and he substituted "Aunt Beth." There was no mistaking the address. He had meant his message for the latter, ignoring the fact of her death. And not a single word for Sabine? She bit her lip, mortified.

Johnson appeared with the breakfast. Sabine gravely gave her the news. The maid at first feigned surprise then admitted a part of her knowledge.

"I didn't know what to do, m'm. I saw the address on the card when Clutterbuck handed it in and it gave me quite a turn. It



was almost as if the mistress had come back from the grave! Clutterbuck was wondering himself. He thought it must be an old letter. Poor Mr. Vallance! Does he say where the wound is, m'm?" In this way she hoped to disguise the truth — that she had read both sides of the card!

"In the ankle. There are no details. As soon as I hear where his hospital is I shall try and arrange to see him, or anyhow get more definite news. It's strange, as you say, about that card, but he probably was feverish. You can tell people that he is wounded, but don't refer to the address. He might be annoyed, on his return. Wounded men are often light-headed."

"Yes m'm. *My husband*" — Johnson's voice filled with pride — "says that they do funny things sometimes when they're hit. He once saw a man run round and round in a circle and then fall down like a log, and when he came to his wits again he thought he was drunk or in heaven! Couldn't remember nothink, m'm!"

Sabine smiled.

"That proves what I say. So don't let there be any chatter." She settled down to her breakfast, a mechanical performance, divided between hope and suspense.

Mark in England? Hers, once more! But in fever and pain — her thoughts ran on. There might have to be operations, involving the loss of a limb? Mark, a cripple! She shuddered, picturing the big man doomed to crutches, eternally lame. And at this juncture there came a tap at the door; Dillon's old face appeared. She was beaming, triumph in her eyes, already hearing the wedding bells. The news had reached her from the kitchen.

Her vigorous common sense drove away the heavy clouds. What was a "trouble in the leg"? When men were losing "their heads and worse"! A few hours and her "darling" would laugh — and be packing too, off to town or wherever her lover was lying "and wishin'" for the sight of her "beautiful face." A good thing it was the foot. A lame soldier would be discharged for a certainty, in "glory and honour." And as to the card, "Hiven help him!" Dillon had tried to write a letter at sea before now with her head swimming; and what must it be on a hard deck



"with Himself packed flat on his back like a sardine?" Her own idea of a hospital ship, the wounded in layers like slices of cake!

It was almost a cheerful Sabine who arrived at the little Ferry House to find Elizma practising, a mute on the bridge of her violin, and Taverner busy, writing letters. They, too, were reassuring, though Orde asked Sabine carelessly how long it was since Miss Vallance's death, and went on to talk of the weather. The sunny sky was clouding over and it looked doubtful for the picnic. Elizma, watching her friend's face, decided that this hasty call was to find an excuse for postponing the outing. News might come at any moment. She would only fret up there on the moor out of reach of telegrams. So Elizma vetoed the expedition. They would come round after lunch and Orde could hear the sonata. It was going to rain; she was sure of it.

Sabine welcomed the altered plans and hurrying back to her dairy work was stopped twice in the village for confirmation of the news which had filtered through from the house. A small child from Mrs. Pedlar, "up-the-lane" brought an anxious message. The old lady was agitated. Was it true that the Squire was coming home? Then Mrs. Cumberquick arrived with a face as long as her broom. The story had reached her in the form of "both 'is pore legs off at the knee"! Sabine had a busy morning, with little chance for private thought.

At lunch time a dog-cart drove up and Sir James Mallison jumped down and came striding across the lawn. He greeted Sabine cordially, with a keen eye for a pretty woman.

"So Vallance is wounded? Bad luck! Have you any further details? I heard rumours in the village and came on to the fountain-head. Knew I'd get the truth from *you*!" He gave her a gallant look that yet was tinged with respect.

She liked the straight-limbed elderly man, whose only son was at the Front and whose wife and girls were immersed in war-work. They were people who turned to deeds, not words. Yielding to a sudden impulse she showed him the mysterious post card, the address uppermost.

He read it gravely and glanced at her.



"The ankle? Well, it might be worse."

As she did not answer he turned the card over once more, his iron-grey brows meeting in two fierce tufts. "Curious? He *must* know that she's dead — poor dear Elizabeth! His mind wandering a bit? That's it — result of shock. Anyhow he can write. That's a great consolation. I hope the poor boy won't be lame." He turned. The blue door had opened to admit the telegraph-girl, breathless. "Ah! Is this further news? I'll wait in the cart — on the chance. Don't you hurry now, Mrs. Cruikshank." He had seen the blood ebb from her cheeks.

"A nice woman," he said to himself as he swung himself up into his seat and proceeded to remove a horse-fly with his twisted whip from the mare's flank. "Steady, lass!" She was quivering and jerking her head away from the groom. He stared out over the laid-back ears, his eyes deliberately turned from the lawn and the silent figure with bent head. "She's taking her time. I wonder, now? Devilish handsome and a widow — Well, Mark might do worse! Fane's a good name and she looks well-bred. Clever, too, as a basket of monkeys. Gull found that out, to his cost." He grinned, the firm lines of his mouth under his white moustache betraying amused admiration. "A long sight better than his last venture in matrimony. Rachel will be disappointed — she thought that one of the girls might do, but I doubt it now Mary's married. Personally I should be sorry. There's something uncanny at Lidding St. Mary. Mark's boy, dying like that —"

He started. Sabine stood in the doorway, still pale but composed.

"Mr Vallance is quite near. In a hospital at Exeter." She gave the name. "Going on well."

"Good!" Sir John looked relieved. "Did he send the wire himself?"

She nodded her head. With a swift glance at the groom holding the fractious mare, she passed the envelope across.

Sir James read it with a frown. It was addressed to Miss Vallance. He stooped over the yellow wheel and lowered his voice.



"I understand. I think my guess was correct." A sudden feeling of pity seized him. Over the calm face raised to his, he had seen a quiver of pain pass. Her eyes were strained. "Cheer up! It will all come right in the end. I appreciate your telling me and, of course, this will go no further." He resumed his old hearty tone. "Glad to think it's no worse." He was tugging off his driving-glove. "If I can be of any assistance at any time, let me know. I'd be delighted. Good-bye, Mrs. Cruikshank." He gave her hand a hearty squeeze. "Don't forget that we're neighbours."

She watched him drive up the lane, straight-backed for all his years, a true and honest gentleman. And suddenly, for the first time for many months, she caught herself regretting the hour of her folly. She had no right to his respect. She was only the mistress of his friend.

Then she glanced down at her fingers, aware of a physical discomfort. The sharp, thin band of her father's ring had been crushed into the soft flesh by that kindly, impulsive hand-shake. Still in the grip of her new depression, she studied the crest engraved on the signet, with the motto underneath:

*"In honour I serve."*

Her smile was bitter. She had served, but not in honour. And now Mark had forgotten her.



## CHAPTER XX

**T**HE sun was setting as Sabine trudged up the last hill to Lidding Moor. Her telegram had been delayed and no one had met her at the Junction on her return from Exeter where she had spent the night. It reminded her of her first walk "seeking a situation" in all the ardour of her girlhood, eagerly looking to the future. But what a lifetime of emotions lay between the two journeys! Now her thoughts must turn to the past; for little happiness lay ahead.

She walked like a woman heavily burdened, too tired to lift her feet from the dust. The beauty of the lonely scene, with the gorse in its full glory stealing up to the evening sky to merge in bars of warm primrose, and the long ribbon of the road, mysterious, beckoning like a finger, brought no sense of pleasure to her — only a fear of isolation that strengthened with each lagging step.

Suddenly her nervous strain relaxed. By the wayside, on a rock that broke the parched monotony, she could see a still figure perched like some strayed elf on its mushroom, gazing into the glow of the sunset. Bareheaded, her hat beside her, Elizma sat, absently twisting her blue beads in her fingers, lost to all but the glory of colour that was painting sky and sea. She started as Sabine drew close, gave a quick exclamation and sprang down from her seat.

"*You?* How nice! You've come back." She was on the dusty road now, Sabine's hand between her own, studying her friend's face and the cruel change in it. "The news is bad?" Her voice was anxious.

Aware that she could not control her own, Sabine nodded si-



lently. This unexpected sympathy was almost more than she could bear.

"My *poor* dear! I understand." Elizma's sweet, husky tones were warm with an open pity.

"You don't!" Sabine looked defiant. She drew away from the other. "You can't. It's impossible."

The golden eyes grew wise and tender, for Elizma was proud herself. She divined the battle in Sabine's heart. She forced the issue deliberately.

"I guessed your secret long ago. You loved Vallance, not Cruikshank."

"It's worse than that."

Unconsciously they fell into step side by side, their faces turned towards home. Elizma broke the short silence.

"Would you care to tell me?" she asked simply. "No one will ever hear the story — except Orde. You can trust him."

Sabine seemed lost in thought. At last she spoke, rather abruptly:

"Must we go home at once? There's the quarry — and I feel so tired. I can't face Dillon yet."

"No. Let's have a little rest." Elizma slipped a hand through her arm. "I came out for a tramp, as I felt in the mood for open spaces and to be alone with my thoughts." She added with transparent guile, "I was getting rather tired of myself when you came to the rescue. Where's the quarry?"

"It's over there." Sabine made a vague gesture.

They turned off across the moor, towards a depression in the ground where rocks were piled unevenly, threaded their way through a tangle of bushes, descending with every step, and arrived at their destination.

Elizma looked round her eagerly.

"How nice! I could stay here all night." She settled herself on the wiry grass, that had blotted out man's handiwork.

Sabine followed her example. She knew now that she meant to confess the story in full and risk the effect. She was reckless in her mood of despair. If Elizma turned away from her it



would only be a minor part of this day of reckoning. She started, without hesitation:

"Supposing I were a bad woman, immoral, would you still know me?"

Elizma smiled, her eyes fixed on the distant line of sea.

"I can't say. I've never met a bad woman — not wholly bad. I'm not sure that they exist. If it comes to that I'm bad myself — 'born in sin', as the Church would say. I know I can trust you, Sabine, so I'm going to tell you *my* secret. My parents were never married. No one knows but an old priest and Orde. I'm an illegitimate child."

She heard Sabine draw in her breath.

"You? How strange! So's Anthony."

Elizma looked unmoved.

"Then Cruikshank?"

"Never existed. I've no right to the name. A respectable cloak — that's all!"

Elizma's supple fingers, with the padded tips of the violinist, came across and covered her friend's.

"And Mark Vallance is the father?"

Sabine started.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't — I guessed. But I'm quite sure that no one else suspects the truth." She went on in a level voice, "Now you're hoping to marry him?"

"I *was*." Sabine's tragic eyes were turned full on her companion. She leaned forward, her pose abandoned and the pain rang out in her voice. "He's forgotten, Elizma — everything! He doesn't know me — not even by sight. They think it's the result of shock. He was buried by a shell, and it's left a gap in his memory. I've seen him and talked to him. He treated me — like a stranger!" She covered her face with her hands.

Elizma, pitiful, watched the tears trickle between the tense fingers.

"He'll recover, dear. It only needs patience."

Silence save for the stifled sobs.



"Hush!" Elizma removed the pins from the dusty hat, tossed it aside and drew the bent head down on her lap, stroking back the heavy hair. "It must have been a dreadful shock. Poor child! But it's not for long. It's just a feature of his illness. Even if he doesn't recall *everything*, by and by, when he's better, you can tell him."

The muffled hopeless voice came up. "You forget! It's not even as if I were an old friend, in his own social position. I'm the *housekeeper* — nothing more! Supposing he didn't credit the story? No one knows, except Dillon. He'd think I was — an adventuress!" Her broken pride lay in the word.

"He couldn't!" Elizma's eyes flashed. "He has loved you once — he'll love you again. You've everything to appeal to a man. Perhaps — who knows — you may start afresh. A finer romance, both of you *free*. Hasn't that occurred to you?"

Sabine stirred and looked up into the vivid, troubled face above her own. Here was hope and, behind it, infinite charity.

"Then you — don't think I've been — wicked?" It might have been an unhappy child pleading for mercy and understanding.

"I can't judge," said Elizma simply. "There are many things done in the name of love that lead to remorse later on. I think, perhaps, you've blinded yourself. One does. It's human. I've been through it."

She felt her hand caught by Sabine and hot lips pressed against it. Silence fell between the pair.

Over the edge of the sea the sun sank and a wan light succeeded the afterglow. A breeze rose up and stirred the leaves, singing through a tuft of rushes fringing a hidden spring. Elizma listened instinctively, searching the dominant minor note of that fairy-like, sibilant piping.

At last Sabine sat up and hunted for her handkerchief.

"I'm a coward," she whispered, mopping her eyes. "But if you knew how I've *longed* for the sight of Mark all these months and years. And then to find him — like that! They'd warned me, of course, but I wouldn't believe it. I had to pretend to him it was natural. They only allowed me to see him for ten minutes,



in a ward where there were three other men. He has to be kept perfectly quiet. They're going to operate to-morrow."

"It *must* have been hard," said Elizma. She pictured the scene vividly. The bare room with its narrow beds and the chilly atmosphere, breathing rules and regulations, outwardly so decorous yet holding the unvoiced tragedy of passion spent and forgotten, the broken spirit of the woman and the maimed body of the man.

Sabine turned to her wistfully.

"I'd like you to know everything — how it happened. I want your advice."

Elizma nodded. Absently she stretched out her hand and snapped off a juicy stem of blackberry and began to peel it, her eyes lowered as Sabine deliberately laid bare the history of the past years. It seemed that she tore down, stage by stage, the castle of dreams until she reached the barren ground.

She finished on a hard note.

"I suppose I did wrong from beginning to end and that this is the punishment."

Elizma was nibbling the green stem thoughtfully.

"You want my opinion?"

"Please." Sabine braced herself to hear the unwelcome truth.

"I don't believe in punishments. I daresay it isn't Christian, but I've never been very orthodox. They seem too petty for a God who has all the power in His own hands. I believe in simple cause and effect. You cheated. Mark belonged to his wife. You knew in your heart it wasn't honest, but you steadily refused to see it. You even dragged in the war as an excuse for moral weakness. Now the veil has been torn from your eyes. But you mustn't confuse cause and effect. You must start afresh — you're given the chance. You can love him at last in all honour. I cheated once, and I paid for it. Not like you — but I was blind. I purposely misjudged Orde. I was proud too, of being better bred, and then" — she gave a husky laugh — "I found that, legally, I was nameless!" She laid an arm round Sabine's shoulders. "You don't think I'm preaching, do you? I should hate



you to think that. What you've told me makes no difference. If anything I love you more. For I know, my dear, what loneliness means."

"Ah!" Sabine raised her head. "What a friend you are! You *dear* woman —" For a moment they clung together. Then she went on in a humbler voice. "How can I start afresh? If it were not for Anthony, I would go straight away from here. Mark does not really need me, and everything is in order. I don't suppose he'll go back to the Front. His ankle is shattered" — her face quivered — "and they fear he will always be lame. Unless his memory returns, he need never know the story. I certainly couldn't tell him myself." She drew herself up with her old pride.

"I think that's shirking it," said Elizma. "You both owe a debt to the child. Besides, why shouldn't you be happy? You love Mark with your whole heart and you're the woman he *ought* to marry. He placed you in your present position — cause and effect again — he should share in the result. Supposing that you went away and lost all touch with him and that his memory returned — as it probably will, in due course — think of the man's suffering? No, you must wait and be brave. It's the only way. I know it's bitter. But love's a deeper thing than pride. That is, if it's worth the name."

"I wonder?"

"You know it is. Otherwise —" Elizma stopped.

"I shouldn't have been Mark's mistress?" Sabine smiled bitterly, finishing the broken sentence.

"Nor the mother of his child." Elizma spoke very gravely. "Would you rather be as you are, or without Anthony?"

A shrewd thrust; Sabine winced. Elizma, remembering the darkest hour of her own life, with its thwarted maternity, at war with Orde's eugenic notions, smiled to herself, watching her friend.

Far away over the sea came a sudden flash of light, like a silver thread on the veiled background — some ship signalling to another a message of warning or protection. A belated bird flew to its nest in the tangled boughs that fringed the quarry. The night settled down to peace.



"I don't know. I can't think clearly." Sabine's voice was very weary. "It's the shock, I suppose. If you'd seen his face; puzzled, courteous, but utterly cold. I had to explain who I was. They had told him that his aunt was dead and warned me to avoid the subject. But he doesn't know about his wife, nor that he has bought Lidding St. Mary. He realizes that something is wrong — this gap in his memory — is worried about it, apologetic. That hurt the most! He used to be so self-assured, almost arrogant. Poor Mark!" Her speech was choked for a moment. Suddenly she turned on herself. "No, I *can't* desert him now! You're perfectly right. I must just sit tight and bear it. But, oh, it's so difficult! To go back to the old rôle of employer and employed. After I've been my own mistress — I've ruled Liddingcombe like his wife. To stand meekly and take orders; give an account of my stewardship —"

Elizma interrupted her.

"But there you're on firm ground. You've managed so splendidly."

"Have I?" Sabine's lips curled. "When we parted he shook hands, thanked me for coming to Exeter and hoped that I could get along *without his assistance* for a little! He doesn't even realize that! It's all wiped out — like a dirty slate."

"For a fresh inscription," said Taverner's wife.

She watched Sabine's restless fingers that were playing unconsciously with a fine chain round her throat. The nervous movement dislodged a pendant that weighed down the platinum links, jerking it out from its hiding-place under the folds of her blouse. It lay now like a splash of blood on the white linen coat, a ruby drop, pear-shaped, of exquisite colour and proportion.

Sabine's eyes fell on it. She held it out to Elizma.

"Do you know what that is? It's a Vallance heirloom that is always given to the bride of the eldest son on her marriage night — the one present that Mark reclaimed when he parted from Sybil. He fastened it round my neck at Niton — a proof of his undying love, that he looked on me as his real wife."

Elizma's sensitive face quivered.



"So you will be. Courage, dear! Some day you'll look back and smile at this. That's life. Our tragedies fade into incidents that have built up character, like the rungs of a steep ladder. We forget the sorrows and remember only what we gained in return. Unless, of course, we're just bromides, and browse through life like tranquil sheep." She gave herself a little shake. "I've no use for those people! I suppose they help natural laws in some way — by mere weight. Keep the globe properly balanced — take in food and breathe out morals! They *seem* contented, but I'd sooner swing to extremes and know the heights and depths of love and pain and joy. You're in the depths now. But you'll rise above them. You always have. It's in your blood — you're no weakling!"

Sabine instinctively straightened her shoulders.

"No. I owe that to my father." An odd smile crossed her face. Fane had been, before all, a lover. "He had his reverses as well as his triumphs — but he always took his fences flying. He'd be ashamed of me now."

Elizma made no response. In her heart she was wondering if Fane, alive, would have extended the indulgence with which he had covered his own adventures to the child of his marriage. She doubted it. Men were biased. They pleaded the excuse of sex, of stronger temptations and desires. Woman might take up man's work and achieve the same successes, wear man's clothes and reap man's wages, but the old "possessive" cult remained. She must keep herself pure for the man she married, whatever his bachelor life may have been, bear children, with all the risk that the father's conduct might have entailed, but never, never err herself. And after marriage she must submit to the laws governing divorce, even to the extent of knowing that a husband was faithless, with all the shame of the hard old world's secret amusement and the physical disgust of sharing him with another woman, but powerless to escape from the tie unless cruelty could be proven.

Elizma shivered at her thoughts. Orde, she knew, agreed with her that the divorce laws of England needed drastic reformation.



What would he think of Sabine? And that other side to the question: a man bound until death to his wife, sated with drugs, a bad mother, yet holding him to the grim bargain. Elizma could count on her husband's pity.

Orde, too, would see in Sabine a case of inherited moral weakness. Mark would stand as another instance; the curse that lay upon his house merely the dangerous effect of in-breeding for generations, of poor and vitiated blood.

Did everything revert to eugenics? Was it the price that the spirit paid to the flesh — and, if so, why? Would man find the remedy; the war strike home the lesson that morality could be only upheld by far stricter laws of health which would safeguard *both* sexes?

A faint, distant chime of bells from the spire of Lidding St. Mary Church stirred her from the deep problem.

"Come —" She held out her hand to Sabine. "What about our families? And Dillon, who probably by now has received your telegram and is picturing you lost on the moor?" She sprang up and drew the other reluctantly to her feet. "Try and see the hopeful side. A further adventure — finer too. You'll win Mark back by love and patience. Orde and I will stand by you. I never have any secrets from him. It's a promise that dates from our reunion." There was loyal anxiety in her voice as she added, "But you can trust him, can't you?"

Sabine looked her straight in the face.

"He won't approve."

Elizma smiled.

"No. But he'll understand."



## CHAPTER XXI

**O**N a boisterous and rainy day Mark came back to Liddingcombe.

Sir James Mallison had met him with the brougham at the Junction and Sabine was expecting the pair to arrive at any moment. Too restless to settle down, she wandered from room to room, her ear on the alert for wheels, her eyes turning to the clock. At last she heard the welcome sound and hurried out into the hall.

The blue gate was opened wide. Through the arch came a tall figure, swinging forward on his crutches, cap wedged down over his brows, from beneath which his grave eyes eagerly scanned the old house.

Sir James saw him to the porch, then excused himself from entering, with his ready tact. The horses were wet; he preferred not to keep them standing.

"I'll leave you in Mrs. Cruikshank's hands." His hearty voice reached Sabine as she stood lost in the shadows that gathered round the oak staircase. "Splendid to see you home again! My dear boy" — as Mark thanked him — "the carriage is yours whenever you want it. You've only to drop me a line, so don't forget. I'll look in soon." He was off with a cheery wave of his hand.

Johnson was holding back the door, her face red with nervous excitement. She babbled incoherently words of welcome and of pity when Mark recognized her.

"Oh, I'm first-rate." He checked the flow. "Not quite fit for football yet! Still — Hullo, there's Vox!" Awkwardly he collapsed on the hall chair and held out his crutches. The spaniel was squirming round his legs, uttering hoarse barks of joy.



Mark gathered him up in his arms and buried his face in the silky coat. "Good chap! Good old fellow! You remember your old master, then?"

Vox, whimpering, licked Mark's cheek.

Sabine, unnoticed, watched the pair, fighting down the sudden longing that seized her to sweep the dog aside and take that bowed head to her breast. Even Johnson, clasping his crutches, tears not far from her prominent eyes, was of more significance than herself. It was a bitter moment.

Controlling her nerves, she came forward and gave an order about the luggage. The maid retired with a suit-case to unburden her mind in the kitchen. Mark looked up with a start at the sound of a strange voice. He tried to rise ineffectually, hampered by his canine friend.

"Please don't move," said Sabine quickly. "I hope you've had a good journey?"

"Excellent." He held out his hand. "How are you, Mrs. Cruikshank?" His blue eyes met hers with a faint perplexity. "Everything all right?"

"Quite, Mr. Vallance." Her fingers slipped out of his, with the secret dread of prolonging the familiar contact. "It's draughty here." She moved as she spoke to close the door, aware that his gaze followed her, with that slight pucker of the brows.

Mark struggled out of his coat and stood up, a hand on the table, his weight thrown on the sound foot. In silence she handed him his crutches.

"Thank you." He felt relieved at the absence on her part of all reference to his misfortune.

"I've had a fire lit in the drawing-room," Sabine explained. "It turned so chilly. I hope you won't find it too warm?" She stood back for him to pass, but he signed for her to precede him.

"I'm very glad. How cheerful!" He stared round the wide old room, pausing a moment on the threshold.

There were new chintzes on the chairs and flowers skilfully arranged. Near the hearth, its back to the window, stood the cane sofa used by Miss Vallance with cushions and a light rug.



The table was laid for tea and the warm glow of the burning logs shone upon the fine old silver, enhancing the lustre of the cups.

Mark drank it in with pleasure.

"Home," he said beneath his breath.

Sabine waited, a hand on the sofa, steadying it as the crippled man lowered his long frame into a sitting position. As she did not move he glanced up.

"You expect me to lie down?" His lips curved with a touch of mischief. There was an air of rebellion about him.

"Isn't it wise, after your journey?"

"Well, I'll obey orders! But I'm not really an invalid now."

"No, I can see that."

He gave her a grateful look and stretched himself full length. With a careless movement she dropped a fold of the light rug over his feet hiding the injured member with its surgical boot that was made of strong *papier mâché*, with little straps to support the sole and keep all weight off the ankle.

It was neatly done and Mark guessed the kindly intention behind the act. He watched her as she moved across to the other side of the fireplace. Lifting the silver kettle, she carefully "mothered" the single cup and warmed the Queen Anne teapot.

"It's not quite boiling yet." She sat down in his aunt's chair patiently, her hands folded.

The man's tired eyes fell on them — the fingers still browned by the sun but slender with tapering tips — and the two rings of plain gold, the emblem of her "widowhood" and her father's worn signet.

He broke the silence abruptly.

"Mrs. Cruikshank?"

Her lowered lids were raised; her dark, mournful eyes met his in mute attention.

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favour. You know how I'm placed?" His voice was jerky. "To all intents and purposes I've mislaid four years of my life. I can remember everything up to the outbreak of war; after that my mind's a blank. My



memory *may* return, but meanwhile it's horribly awkward. I understand that you have been here for, practically, the whole period and I want you, if you will, to coach me in things I'm expected to know."

She nodded her head, watching him. He went on, satisfied:

"Sir James Mallison has been a great help. He came several times to Exeter and gave me the main facts; the death of my wife and the news — almost incredible — that Lidding St. Mary is mine once more. But all sorts of other matters worry me as they crop up. There's the question of money, for instance. Of course I've heard of my legacy but I don't know what it amounts to." He hesitated, his face strained, then broke out impatiently, "I hate being kept in the dark! I've been told that I'm to let things slide — indefinitely. That's absurd! I *must* know how I stand."

"Of course." Her prompt acquiescence soothed him; his tense attitude relaxed. "You would worry far more if you didn't." The ghost of a smile flickered across the beautiful curves of her mouth.

It seemed to Mark that something strong and purposeful emanated from this woman whose position in his household he could not definitely gauge.

She went on in her musical voice:

"I quite understand, Mr. Vallance, and I will help you as far as I can. After the death of your aunt and before you went to the Front you practically left the management of your house and property in my hands. For instance I arranged the purchase of Lidding St. Mary from the Gulls. You can have the figures at any moment. The accounts are all in order." A faint pride rang out in the statement. "The deeds are in your lawyers' charge. Also the list of your investments under your cousin's will. But meanwhile there is nothing to cause you any anxiety, financial or otherwise. You can take my word for it."

"I'm sure I can. I'm most g-grateful." He stammered a little. "It's not that. It's just the whole uncertainty. I haven't even saved my letters. When that shell got me, I was buried and I



lost everything I possessed. Including my wits!" He smiled grimly. "What I really meant just now was I hoped that you'd be quite frank with me — not put me off, if anything's wrong. I'm practically well again. I can take up my own work."

Sabine was pouring the boiling water carefully on to the tea-leaves. He saw her give a sudden start. Her lips tightened as if with pain.

"You haven't scalded yourself?" he exclaimed.

"No." She spoke with an effort. "The handle was hot — that's all." His words had prompted the excuse.

Take up his own work? Then there would be no need of her. Her deepest fear lay in this.

Relieved, Mark went back to his problem.

"As you know, I'm home on sick leave. But I've no doubt as to the issue. In due course I shall be discharged. I'm of no further active use. So I might as well take up my life where I left it before I joined the army." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Have I been home since I went to the Front? Surely I must have had some leave."

Sabine's heart dropped a beat. The room seemed strangely silent save for the steady tick of the clock. He must not guess. She prayed for strength and inspiration at this crisis. Then she heard herself answer calmly:

"You have not been back to Liddingcombe. Some of your letters were sent from Paris. No doubt you spent your leave there?"

"Probably." His face cleared. "I'm glad of that. It makes things simpler. Of course, after my aunt's death, there was nothing to bring me home."

"No."

Why did she look so sad? Had she, too, missed Miss Vallance? Mark wondered. Then he recalled the fact of her own loss. Sir James had explained her widowed condition. Mark felt vexed with himself for arousing painful memories. Clumsily he changed the subject.

"Well, I think we've talked enough business. It's really Sir



James's fault. He told me I could rely on you — of all you have done in my absence. He's a great admirer of yours, Mrs. Cruikshank." He gave her the open boyish smile she remembered in the early days of their platonic friendship; the heart-whole smile of a man who has no fear of a woman's charm. It hurt her more than the harshest word, emphasizing the gulf between them.

She came across with his cup and the silver dish holding scones.

"Thanks — it's very good of you. But you shouldn't be waiting on me like this." He glanced at the cup. "What about sugar? Or is that a vanished luxury? Everything seems short in England."

"I — remembered." She turned away. "I put in two lumps. It's not too much?"

"Not when I can get it," he laughed. "I hope that you're going to join me?"

"Thanks, but I've had my tea. In the nursery."

"With your child?" He drank thirstily, then laid the cup on the stool beside him. "Sir James told me about him and his old Irish nurse. I understand she was with my aunt to the last, and a perfect treasure. I should like to thank her. What is her name?"

"Dillon."

He nodded. "And your baby?"

"He is called Anthony."

"That's odd!" Mark smiled. "When I was a boy at school they christened me 'Mark Anthony'. We must certainly get acquainted." He little guessed that the well-meant speech ran through Sabine like a knife. The warm fire and the tea had induced in him a genial mood. "Then there are the other servants, Cook and Ellen. I must see them."

"Ellen has left. There's a new housemaid, Mary — a niece of Mrs. Pedlar's." Sabine, at the end of her strength, was making her way to the door. "If you will excuse me now? Oh, I forgot —" She hesitated, caught in the net of her duties. "There's your room. I've made an alteration which I hope you'll approve. Those polished stairs are so steep I thought — we



thought —” Her words faltered but she caught herself in hand again. “We thought it would be easier if you slept on the ground floor. But, of course, that’s exactly as you wish. Your old room is in order.”

Mark looked interested.

“Very thoughtful. It sounds convenient.” How pale she was! He had admired her rich, dark colouring on the day she had visited the hospital. Could she be nervous? He must help her. “You’d like me to come and see it now?” He laid down his empty cup. “I’ve finished tea. Yes, really. I don’t want to spoil my dinner.” He bent down for his crutches. One had slipped beyond his reach. Sabine came back and retrieved it, standing rigid by his side, a hand on the sofa, as he rose. Thank Heaven she did not try to assist him! This was his passing thought. He little guessed that she dared not, his near presence calling for desperate self-control. “I’m not as helpless as I look, but I’m scared to death of falling down.” His eyes twinkled. “There’s a confession!”

“It might hinder your recovery.”

An odd look crossed his face. Again she had read his mind. A woman of intuition? A lady too. He was perplexed. How had she come to his house in this subordinate position? His eyes ran over her, as she led the way down the passage, noting the fine poise of her head with its smooth and shining hair, the cut of her simple dress that showed off her graceful figure and the light step of those well-shod feet. About her was the sense of finish that appeals to the masculine mind, with a dearth of superfluous ornament; only the fine platinum chain breaking the line of her white neck to lose itself in the folds of her blouse. A mystery? It quickened his senses.

At the door before the approach to his study, she turned quickly and surprised the admiration on his face. For the first time since his return, hope stirred from its hiding-place. Elizma seemed a true prophet. She would win him back — a new romance. The Fane blood raced through her veins and warmed her voice when she spoke.



"It's only a makeshift," she cautioned him, smiling, as she turned the handle of the door.

Mark, from his great height, peered eagerly over her shoulder.

"Why, it's the old gun-room! I never should have recognized it. What a jolly nice place."

Again he was the old Mark of their happy bathing days. The years had slipped away between them.

"You like it?" Unconsciously she relaxed from her formal pose, catching the man's note of excitement. The clear colour rose in her cheeks, her mouth was like a scarlet flower.

"I do." He followed her into the room and stood leaning against the rail of the fine old mahogany bed. "Did you plan it all yourself?"

"Yes. It's a part of my stewardship." She ventured the little joke.

"By Jove!" His eyes came back to her face. "It's a man's room."

"I meant it to be." She looked triumphant, aware that the words held the highest form of praise. "You see, I have this advantage: I happen to know what you prefer."

"Yes — I suppose so. Evidently."

She wondered if she had made a mistake but he added quickly:

"It's top-hole."

He studied the transformation. The room had been a disused place where lumber had accumulated. Now the walls were distempered in a rich ochre colour. There were curtains of myrtle green at the windows that matched the carpet and a big arm-chair which stood, a rack for books behind it, on one side of the old fireplace. The other recess held a fine tall-boy in dark mahogany like the bed. Close to the latter was a table with a reading-lamp and a brass tray on which stood a tantalus and siphon, beneath a shelf filled with books. All her loving care for him had been expended in their choice. They were to soothe sleepless hours, food for the weary spirit.

No ornaments broke the clean lines of the beautiful old furniture save a bronze clock on the mantel-shelf and a pair of high



candlesticks. But a single engraving hung above them, a sea-piece in a sombre frame with a stormy sky and sunlit water, the gulls flashing over the waves. Mark's glance rested on it and he gave a start of surprised recognition.

"Wherever did you find that? It used to be at Lidding St. Mary. In my father's dressing-room."

"I know. Cook remembered it. I unearthed it from the far attic, wedged in under the eaves, behind — you'll laugh — a rocking-horse! I nearly stole it for Anthony."

"Never! Had it a broken nose? If so, it's 'Dobbin' — my first charger. Of course the little chap must have it. I'll get it down for him to-morrow —" He checked himself with a rueful smile and caught the pity on her face that came and went in a flash.

"I shouldn't advise you to," she said. "It's a dirty old loft. But I'll tell Steve, if you really can spare the toy. Anthony will be overjoyed."

Again he blessed her for her tact. His "housekeeper"? Good Lord! He looked quickly away from her with the guilty fear she might read his thoughts.

"Do — if it's any good! You'd better see to the rockers first. This room looks a different shape. There used to be a deep alcove under the curve of the kitchen stairs with a funny little window that wouldn't open — high up."

"It opens now. Would you care to see? It's behind the curtain there." She walked across and drew back the heavy folds, then smiled at Mark over her shoulder.

It was the old unconscious pose that had caught his fancy years before when in seeking shelter from the storm she had paused in the narrow archway. No memory rose to stir his blood but the magic worked anew. He was struck by the charm of that vivid face and the curve of her throat, fuller now with the ripeness of maturity, which had fulfilled the promise of youth.

"Look!" Her voice was imperious.

Amused, he obeyed. Standing behind her, propped on his crutches, he could see that the walls of the deep recess were



distempered too, the rough old boards covered with cork matting and that in the centre stood a bath with, behind it, a washing-stand and a shaving mirror so arranged that the full light fell upon it.

"It's the best I could do," Sabine explained. "It was no good your sleeping here and toiling up to the bath-room. I was tempted to have it properly fitted, but everything's so costly now, and since you are moving to Lidding St. Mary —" She paused, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"I don't feel inclined for a move at present. You've made it all so comfortable. I can splash here as much as I like!" His smile widened.

To his surprise he saw the light spring up in her face; she gave a quick sigh of relief. He thought her over-anxious and added a further word of praise.

"Really, you know, Mrs. Cruikshank" (How badly the name fitted her!) "I didn't expect a welcome like this. Although I've been longing to get home, there was always a sort of dread. An empty house. Without my aunt — Oh well, you'll understand? We'd lived so many years together."

She nodded gravely, meeting his eyes. A sudden shyness invaded her. She feared what he might read in her own.

"You must be tired. If you've everything you require, I'll be going now." She slipped past him. "Here's the bell. It rings in the pantry — Johnson will come. You'd like dinner at eight o'clock?"

"Please. And thank you for all you've done."

The door closed gently behind her. Mark stood for a moment, thoughtful. Through the window he could see the fringe of the hazel grove across the kitchen-garden wall. The steady noise of the rain pattering on an outhouse roof was the only note that broke the silence. The grey sky pressed down forlornly on the steaming land. He was home again, no longer bound to daily rules and prohibitions, master of his own actions. Yet, through the relief inspired by freedom swept a growing sense of loneliness and the knowledge of his helpless state, a crippled man, without



relations. It enhanced the value of the woman whose presence seemed unexplained, approved by the aunt he had loved and invested by himself in the lost years with full power.

Sir James had spoken highly of her.

"No wonder," mused Mark as he settled himself in the deep arm-chair. "Capable and refined too — this room shows good taste. I wonder how she came here?"

On a low stool by his side stood a box of cigarettes with an ash-tray and matches. He picked up the former and read the name of the maker, frowning again.

"Why, she even knows what I smoke — has remembered it all these years! It's almost like a fairy tale."

He would have thought it still more strange could he have followed Sabine into the still drawing-room and witnessed her behaviour.

Johnson had cleared away the tea, but the lamps had not yet been brought. The room was full of deepening shadows and the warm scent of flowers. Outside, the wind blustered and the storm seemed to emphasize the feeling of home and security within the deep old walls. Sabine wandered to the sofa. It was as Mark had left it, the rug fallen to the floor, a dent in the soft upper cushion covered with fine muslin, through which the faded satin gleamed.

She glanced at the closed door nervously, then bent lower. Now her cheek filled the hollow left by Mark's. A faint scent, aromatic, suggesting bay-leaves, lingered there from his hair, and roused poignant memories. Her eyes closed. With a stifled sob, she turned her face and pressed her lips to the place where his dear head had lain.



## CHAPTER XXII

CONTRARY to her expectations Sabine slept soundly. She awoke to a morning of sapphire and gold to find Dillon by her bed, with Anthony, in wild spirits, claiming his rocking-horse.

The old nurse was optimistic. The Saints who had sent Mark home undoubtedly to "right the wrong," with the convenient penalty of a disabled limb, would remember the innocent little victim and provide Anthony with a father.

But the day was doomed to reaction. At lunch, where they met for the first time, Sabine found, not the old Mark, but a moody man in the grip of a taciturn depression.

He greeted her formally. Save for a passing remark devoted to the change in the weather, there was no conversation. Across the long, well-laid table they faced each other, oceans apart. She could see, in the dazzling light, lines that war and suffering had engraved on his handsome face, with a deep furrow between the brows that testified to the strain of hourly responsibility. The fact that he did not recollect the dangers through which he had passed could not defeat Nature's plan, which makes of the human countenance a chart for those with eyes to read.

He had hardened perceptibly. Here was difficult material for a woman to mould to her secret desire.

At last he broke the heavy silence.

"Are there apples in this room?" He sniffed as he spoke distastefully, his glance wandering to the sideboard.

"No, we never keep them here. Besides, they're very scarce this autumn. The late frosts ruined the crop."

"Oh." He still looked suspicious.

Sabine, aware of this, rose from her chair, with a faint mistrust



of Johnson in an absent-minded mood, and opened the pair of side cupboards in the fine old Sheraton piece.

"You see?" She turned for his confirmation.

"It's strange," said Mark. "I could have sworn that there were apples somewhere about." He changed the subject with a frown. "Is Mrs. Pedlar still alive?"

"Yes; old Humporley too. He's bedridden and failing fast, but a niece has come to help his wife, so he's well looked after. I took him down a bottle of village port last week. He was very pleased, but when I called a few days later there it stood, untouched! It's being kept for the funeral. Did you ever hear of such a thing? His own wish — a matter of pride. He says that he likes to feel when he's gone that they'll put him away 'properly,' with a glass of wine for the neighbours. And there was old Mrs. Humporley stitching hard at a crepe bonnet, sitting by his bedside! I think she realized my surprise for she said it 'interested William' — he was glad to think that his old woman would look so smart by the grave!"

Mark nodded without smiling. "It's a great occasion in village lives. The respect that is shown after death helps to remove its sting. They're generous to their dead — which is more than *we* are, sometimes." He relapsed into his gloomy mood.

Johnson brought in the coffee. Through the open door came the sound of a child crying upstairs. Mark turned his head sharply.

"I'm afraid that's Anthony," said Sabine. "If you'll excuse me?" She rose from the table.

"Dillon's with him, m'm," breathed Johnson. "He fell off the rocking horse."

"Poor little chap," said Mark. "Go, by all means." It was a dismissal.

"I'm sorry." Sabine looked annoyed. "It's very rarely that he cries and he was delighted with your present." She glanced at Mark as she passed him, trying to read his secret thoughts.

He nodded, his eyes averted. As soon as she had left the room, he turned to Johnson eagerly.



"Have you any apples in the house?"

"No sir. There's a few in the loft, but they're hardly fit to bring to table. Shall I see if we can get some?"

"No. That wasn't the reason I asked. I thought I could smell them." He sniffed again. "It might be a cut melon?"

"There isn't one, sir. The only dessert is the grapes that Lady Mallison sent and the nectarines you had last night. Shall I fetch them?" She stood by his chair, with the look of compassion on her face that roused the man's inward impatience.

"No, thanks. Just throw up that window. It's stifling in here." His voice was short.

Johnson, in a flurry, obeyed. She had noticed that little beads of sweat were glistening on Mark's forehead. His growing pallor frightened her.

"If he faints, I shall go off meself!" was her thought and she beat a hasty retreat. "He do look queer and no mistake! P'raps there's fits in the blood?" She jumped and pressed a hand to her heart as a bell clanged through the silence. "Lor' bless me, what's that? The front door!" She put down the tray on the pantry table with a thud. "Gave me a turn, it did. I'll be thankful when my Fred comes 'ome and I have a little peace." She glanced anxiously at the glass that hung beneath an almanac with intermittent fairs and texts. Her red cheeks had not lost their colour. "It's me nerves," she thought. "Being married and not married, so to speak. It's enough to upset any girl. Drat the old war!" She flounced out.

Sir James Mallison stood in the porch. She ushered him into the dining-room.

Mark was at the open window. He turned, excitement on his face.

"Hullo, Mallison! Come here, quick. I never saw such a sight in my life — look!" He pointed dramatically.

Across the meadow, beyond the lane, where the ground sloped up from the high bank, two girls, arm in arm, were sauntering, their eyes turned to the straggling white house. They wore smocks, loosely belted, that barely reached to their knees, dis-



closing breeches and leather gaiters. Their faces, browned by sun and wind, shone beneath their slouch hats and in their mouths were cigarettes.

Sir James went off in a roar of laughter.

"Land girls — that's all! Never seen any of them before? Damn it, the man's scandalized!" He rocked with mirth at Mark's expression. "You'll have to get used to it, my boy. All the women wear the breeks in these days — we're nowhere! But, surely, at the Front —" He checked himself annoyed and awkward, "I forgot. Of course it's new to you," and went on more soberly, "We ought to be proud of our women. They stick at nothing, God bless 'em!"

"Oh, that's the solution, is it?" said Mark. The light had died out of his face. He turned away restlessly. "Come to my study — unless you'll have a drink first? I'm glad to see you — I want your advice."

Sir James refused the invitation. He was moved by a strong man's pity as he watched the fine figure of his friend swinging along wearily, upheld by his crutches, down the passage and realized that this was only a part of his illness. He guessed that the lapse of memory troubled Mark far more than his shattered ankle, and cursed himself for his tactless mirth.

They reached the sunny, bare room, and settled down in the arm-chairs. Mark carefully filled his pipe and for a moment there was silence. Then he looked up.

"I'm rather bothered. I can't get the hang of things. There's Mrs. Cruikshank, for instance. What, exactly, is she here?"

Sir James was lighting a cigar from the box passed by his host. He seemed absorbed in the task.

"Well —" He blew out the match and laid it thoughtfully in the fender. He did not raise his eyes as he spoke. "I suppose she'd call herself a 'bailiff' — under the new dispensation. Though she doesn't dress to the part like our young friends on the land! But she's every bit as good as a man. She tackled Gull like a lawyer."

"Still, the fact remains, she's a woman," Mark went on steadily.



"I'm going to ask you a plain question. Now that Aunt Beth is dead, is it all right her being here?"

Sir James sat up very straight, a faint twinkle in his eyes, suppressed as he met Mark's.

"If you ask me my opinion I should say it was perfectly all right. Every one in the place respects her and she's the widow of a soldier. I imagine she's not well off and she has the boy to bring up. That of course would be a drawback if she had to find another job. The main point is, she has lived here so long that she's looked upon as a fixture. But I quite see —"

Mark interrupted. "I was thinking of her — not myself. I'm more than satisfied. She seems thoroughly capable and in every way a superior person. Too superior! I can't imagine how she ever settled here or, to tell the truth, in what manner. Did my aunt treat her as a friend?"

All Sir James' chivalry rose in defence of the lonely woman at this unexpected question.

"Undoubtedly. So did you. As regards Mrs. Grundy, this war has given her decent burial. Everywhere that one goes women are taking up men's work: lady-gardeners, lady-chauffeurs. It's a recognized thing — sex doesn't count. Why should it in your case? I should say that if you turned her out you'd be blamed by the whole parish. She's worked in your interests from first to last."

Mark nodded.

"Then that's settled. I'm much relieved by what you say."

Sir James drove the last nail home in his kindly argument.

"She's a war widow. It should count. That's your excuse if there's any talk. But there won't be. She's too much liked. Have you seen the child? A fine boy."

"Not yet."

Sir James stood up, an eye on the clock.

"Of course, if you marry —" He stopped, checked by Mark's laugh, more natural now.

"I look like running after women, don't I?" He pointed to his ankle.



"They'll run after you!" Sir James chuckled. "You're a marked man — you be careful! Get Mrs. Cruikshank to protect you. There's another use for her. She's a fine woman." A sly smile lifted the bristling, white moustache. "Gad, I shouldn't mind having her as a bailiff myself, if she'd come! I expect she'll marry again some day." From under his bushy brows he watched the effect of this suggestion.

Mark was puffing away at his pipe, calm and indifferent. But the worried look had left his face.

"Then you'd leave everything in her hands, if you were in my place, for a time?"

"I should. Judging from all I hear."

"It would be a relief," Mark confessed. "I shall pick up the details pretty soon, but I don't feel quite myself yet." He passed a hand across his head as though it ached, his eyes half-closed.

"You can hardly expect to," said Sir James. "Is that the time? I must be off. Unless there's any other matter in which I can help? I'm going on to the Cathcarts' with a letter from Roger. By the way, they're friends of Mrs. Cruikshank's. She knew them in her girlhood days, so Babs told my wife."

Mark was struggling out of his chair.

"What was her name before she married?"

"Fane. Good people, I believe. Well, she looks it, doesn't she? Now, don't you stir — I ought to know my way out of here by now." He gave his jolly ringing laugh. "D'you remember that night —" He broke off. "Dash it! I nearly forgot to give you Rachel's message. When will you come and dine with us? Or lunch, if it's more convenient? Of course we'll send the carriage for you. You've only to fix the day."

"That's very kind." Mark hesitated. "Honestly, Mallison, I'd rather wait for a little. I want to try and sort things out in my own mind. Just at present I feel at a disadvantage. You understand, don't you?"

Sir James nodded.

"All right. But we sha'n't let you become a hermit. That's what poor old Beverley's done. You know both his boys were



killed? I force an entrance there sometimes. He curses me and then admits when I'm going that it's done him good. My wife will be coming round to see you, and Ruth — she's the only girl at home. You remember her?"

"As a child," Mark smiled reminiscently. "My last memory of her, I believe, was climbing the walnut tree. I suppose those escapades are over?"

"I'm afraid so." Sir James sighed. "I don't like their growing up. It's the beginning of losing them."

Despite his visitor's objections, Mark insisted on seeing him to the front door. As he lingered in the porch, he heard a child's irrepressible laugh. It floated down the dark staircase, followed by an Irish voice:

"Will ye be still? Hush, then!"

Mark turned back into the hall.

"Is that Anthony?" he called up. "Can you bring him down? I'd like to see him."

"I will, sir."

An old woman, stout and motherly, came to the bend of the stairs, a child held in her arms.

Mark looked eagerly at the pair, descending the slippery steps with caution.

"I suppose you're 'Dillon'? I've been wanting to thank you for all you did for my aunt." He sat down on the hall chair and watched the approach of the nurse and her charge.

"I'll not be needing thanks, sir. A pleasure it was to wait on her. Patient and like a saint at the last." She set Anthony on his feet. "Say how d'ye do to the gintleman?"

But Anthony would only stare.

"Will he come to me?" asked Mark.

Dillon, for answer, lifted him up. Her heart was too full for words. She watched the man take the child and balance him easily on his knee, an arm round the small, soft body. There was a tender light in his eyes.

Anthony gravely studied Mark.

"Big," he announced solemnly.



"A bit bigger than you, old chap." Mark smiled into the wondering face with its shell-pink colouring, wide dark eyes and rosy mouth. "Though you've sturdy legs, haven't you?" His hand passed over the dimpled knees in a furtive caress. "What fine shoes!"

Anthony stuck out his feet and gazed at them with an air of pride.

There came a light step on the stairs. Mark looked up. Sabine stood there as though suddenly turned to stone, her gaze riveted on the group.

"We're making friends," Mark informed her.

She did not answer. He waited, surprised, noting the tense look on her face. Her lips were compressed as though in pain. It flashed across him suddenly that the picture of her son on his knee had recalled poignant memories of the dead soldier. He felt troubled. Luckily at this juncture the child created a diversion. The tip of a silk handkerchief, tucked into Mark's cuff, had attracted his attention. A tug. Out it came, streaming. Anthony chuckled with delight.

"You young rascal!" Mark stooped impulsively and kissed the cheek, smooth and firm, of the little culprit. He heard the old nurse beside him catch her breath with a muttered word. When he raised his head, to his amazement he saw that her eyes were full of tears. "Am I keeping him too long?" he asked, to cover the awkward situation. "I expect you want to get him out while the sun lasts." He delivered his burden into Dillon's out-stretched arms.

"Thank you, sir." She struggled for speech. "I'm hopin' you're feeling better, sir?"

"Oh, I'm all right. Glad to be home." He looked past her. The staircase was empty. Sabine had noiselessly withdrawn. "He's a fine little chap. I should think his mother must be proud of him." He lowered his voice, adding gently, touched by the wistful gaze of the Irish eyes in that wrinkled old face, "Hard luck, about the father."

"It is that, sir," said Dillon gravely.



## CHAPTER XXIII

**M**ARK was not left for long to the seclusion he craved. His old friends rallied round him and Lady Mallison refused to accept his excuses. At the end of a fortnight she carried him off triumphantly for a week-end.

Sabine watched Mark's departure in a victoria beside his hostess, after an ineffectual protest against usurping the best seat. Opposite him sat a young girl with bobbed hair and laughing eyes, well dressed in country fashion and bearing the imprint of her caste. Ruth, quite ready to play the part designed for her by her parent, slyly apprizing Mark as a potential Boaz!

Sabine judged her as barely twenty, but a twenty of the era of war which had the effect of a forcing house for immature femininity. Despoiled of the old excitements, coming-out balls and social functions hedged about with orthodoxy, the war-time maiden could enjoy a freer form of gaiety in the shape of unrestricted converse with men on leave at camp concerts and hurriedly arranged dances, all more or less unchaperoned, where she did not attempt serious war work. With the increasing dearth of men in the countryside, competition for the favours of those remaining, and, more still, for the ebb and flow of officers in all classes, had multiplied and resulted in a doubtful form of sport, girls no longer admired and courted, but themselves the Dianas of the chase.

Something in Ruth's pointed face as she leaned forward to speak to Mark warned Sabine of her intention. The remark evoked a laugh from the man, and the mother smiled indulgently. For Lady Mallison knew her daughter and deeply desired the match. Ruth's charm would not last; it was only the effect of



youth. The too thin, boyish figure would become angular. Already she was a trifle sallow and there was a bitter-sweet atmosphere about her little shafts of humour that betrayed her discontent. When excitement was wanting she was moody, at moments hysterical. Mark could offer her a position in which looks would not count, a definite standing in the country backed by his ample means.

Sir James did not share in his wife's project, but his objections, based upon the crippled condition of the man and the superstitions that surrounded the old house at Lidding St. Mary, were waved aside as negligible. In his first match the baronet had proved himself a masterful husband, exacting obedience from his wife and only daughter, now married. The position had been reversed. The present Lady Mallison "managed him" — her own expression — and Ruth could turn him round her finger. She was his favourite among the trio of girls which his second union had brought him, next in his heart to his soldier son. Yet he held no share in the understanding, barely voiced, between mother and daughter.

Some of this Sabine divined, as she stood, screened by the muslin curtain in the nursery, a prey to helpless rebellion. Was she to efface herself and see the father of her child marry this chit of a girl? For the first time she was jealous of Youth, aware of her own maturity. Could its shallow appeal tempt Mark — its virginity and inexperience?

For the past fortnight she had been passive, too nervous to exert her charm. But now Sabine realized that the progress in their friendship which had brought her a mixture of pain and pleasure was no guarantee of the future. She must enter the field of competition.

The fact was a sting to her pride. In the old days she had never stooped wilfully to attract a man. She had left all initiative to her lover, save in the crucial hour when her fate had been decided. Newer methods menaced her. She must meet Ruth on her own ground.

As the carriage vanished up the lane she turned away from the



window, and paused before the looking-glass, critical, studying her appearance. Slowly her stormy brow cleared. In imagination she saw Ruth's face, sharp-featured, lacking colour, with its assumption of innocence and the challenge of the sly blue eyes under their faintly bistre lids, reflected there by her own. Here was no mother for Mark's children, no depth of feeling to stir his passion.

A flaw in her own costume caught her attention, as insignificant trifles will in a captious mood. The sleeves were too full, spoiling the line from shoulder to shoulder. She went out in search of Dillon, a plan forming in her mind.

Anthony spent a blissful day in charge of the housemaid, who was his favourite slave. Dillon was closeted with her mistress, overhauling her scattered wardrobe. There were beautiful clothes hidden away; for Sabine had been expecting her lover to return on leave, before the news of his disaster, and had prepared accordingly, careless of expense.

The old nurse was in her glory, once more the experienced maid, rejoicing to feel the smooth touch of fine materials under her fingers. Her voice hummed like a top as Sabine, busy and critical, tried on a series of dainty blouses or frowned down at the lines of a skirt.

"It's through the eyes that a man feels before he knows what's amiss with him," Dillon asserted, on her knees, pinning back an errant fold in a deceptively simple tea-gown. "There now, Miss Sabine, dear, have a look at yourself!" She rose to her feet, stout and triumphant. "Thim sleeves took my fancy when it first came home from Madame Owen. You could play the piano fine in thim and they'd fall away from your arms and show the illegant shape to Himself."

Sabine laughed. The old woman's face was so serious.

"You don't mince matters, Dilly!"

The Irish eyes looked up, twinkling.

"I niver had the cliver tongue, but I know what suits you, m'm. You was meant for a dainty lady. It's gone to me heart, since Himself returned, to see you about as if in mourning." She



gathered up the severe serge gown that Sabine had discarded. "You'll be giving this to Johnson, perhaps? It would come in grand for her bottom drawer." There was a wheedling note in her voice.

Sabine was trying the effect of a soft-toned knot of flowers tucked in the loose-swathed belt.

"If you like." Then she retracted the words. "No, I'll keep it. One never knows. Supposing we had to leave here, Dilly?"

"Ye will not." Dillon smiled wisely. "Not if the man's human! There's a way they do be wearin' the hair would suit you, I'm thinking, Miss Sabine." With her eyes half-closed she studied her mistress. "Its not iveryone could afford it — not them as goes in for rat's tails frizzed out over their ears." This was a sly hit at Ruth. "But you've plinty of hair, the Saints be praised." She crossed herself, superstitious. A direct compliment challenged Fate. "I saw a picture in the *Tatler* of a lady of title — not that it counts nowadays!" She gave a sniff. "There's plinty of Lady Gulls about. But, as I was saying, I could try it this evening, if you're willin', m'm?"

"Very well." Sabine slipped out of the soft tea-gown and yawned with luxurious satisfaction, her white arms stretched above her head.

The contrast between them and her hands, still browned by the summer's sun, arrested Dillon's attention.

"If you'll be taking my advice you'll slape in them owld washin' gloves, with cold crame rubbed in first."

"Not if I know it! You'll be wanting to make up my face next."

"'Dade and it don't need it, dearie!" The old woman smiled fondly. "Not that a little touch of crame worked in with the fingers is wasted when the wind sharpens. Better still, butter-milk. I could get that with aise, and Cook know nothing. I will — this blessed night."

Thus another feminine pair conspired to win the lonely man from the path of celibacy. Sir James had been right in his prophecy. Mark had no need to "run after women."



In his turn, Sir James watched his daughter flutter round their guest, at one moment claiming him as the friend of her childhood days, reviving stories of the schoolroom, chaffing Mark on equal terms, boyish yet provocative, at another almost mature in her manner, keeping Mark at arm's length yet luring him on deliberately, playing upon his worn nerves. She even invented a trifling quarrel that worried the victim, unsuspecting of the truth: it afforded her a chance of an outlet for sentiment in the process known as "making it up"!

It tried Sir James's loyalty hard. He saw through the girl's manoeuvres and resented them. She was throwing herself deliberately at Mark's head. And his wife looked on, apparently blind. His honest male exasperation produced no effect. Ruth was "only a child"! He must not put "ideas" into her head!

Although he liked and respected his guest, both as a soldier and a man, Sir James drew a deep breath of relief when the hour of departure drew near. Lady Mallison had arranged to see Mark home in the carriage. At the last moment she pleaded a headache and deputed Ruth to fill her place.

It was a grey afternoon, with swiftly moving heavy clouds, the sea flicked by a cold wind, that sent white horses galloping. Gulls were flying far inland, conscious of the coming gale. In the half light the country lanes, strewn with leaves, and the rotting banks held a forlorn, autumnal note. Ruth, too, seemed to feel the moist depression in the air. She pulled the rug tighter round her with a shiver and made this an excuse to draw close to Mark's side.

"It's getting chilly, isn't it?" She snuggled against him like a child, seeking warmth.

"I oughtn't to have let you come. I hope you won't catch cold?" He studied the face near his shoulder with its fluffed-out fair hair, pointed chin and petulant lips, a red thread against her pallor.

"Do you think I would let you go home alone?" Her gaze wandered over his face and paused for a moment at his mouth, following some secret thought.



"Why not?" he looked surprised.

She shrugged her shoulders, suddenly pettish.

"That's all the thanks I get! All you soldier men are spoilt!" Mark's blue eyes twinkled.

"I like being spoilt. I'm — most humbly grateful."

"You *sound* 'humble'!" She laughed, piqued. Suddenly she thrust a hand through his arm and her manner changed. "I say, old dear, don't let's quarrel. I'm in a rotten mood to-day. It's so dismal at home now, with Roger and the girls away. I shall miss you awfully. That's the truth of the matter."

"Shall you?" He was touched.

She nodded her head. With the action, her short hair was tossed forward over her cheeks in a fluffy mass, fine as silk and fairer by contrast with her black velvet cap. She darted a side-long glance at Mark from beneath her lashes.

"And you?" she asked.

He returned the look, inwardly puzzled by the variety of her moods with which he could not keep pace.

"I'm used to being alone. You must come sometimes and cheer me up. Will you?"

"Yes." The hand that lay in the crook of his arm gave it a faint, lingering pressure. "I often ride past your house and I'm sure mother wouldn't mind. It isn't as if we hadn't been children together, is it?" she added.

Mark missed the subtle intention, but the touch of propriety amused him. Besides they had not been children together. His playmate had been her half-sister.

"I can supply a chaperon, if necessary," he told her, smiling. She looked up sharply.

"You mean Mrs. Cruikshank? Your — housekeeper?"

The word held a faint slur which he resented.

"Hardly that. She's more like a bailiff — she looks after my estate." The carriage drew up as she spoke. "Why, here we are! How quick it's been. You'll come in?" He reached for his crutches.

She made a show of hesitation that roused, as intended, his obstinacy.



"I don't — *think* so."

"Oh yes, you must. And have a good warm by the fire before you start home again."

"Well, it would be nice. My feet are frozen!" She opened the blue gate and dropped him a curtsy, her eyes dancing, moved by a sudden stir of excitement at the prospect of this chance for flirtation.

When they reached the porch, Mark discovered that he had left his key behind.

"Shall I ring?" Ruth forestalled his effort, pulling the old-fashioned knob. Then she bent forward, listening. "There's some one singing," she told her host.

"Impossible." Mark frowned.

Johnson, at last, opened the door. A wave of melody swept out like a warm breath in their faces.

"Who is it?" he asked sharply.

"Only Mrs. Cruikshank, sir." The maid looked rather flurried. "We didn't expect you home so soon. I'll tell her." She was retreating quickly but Mark checked her.

"No, don't." He moved forward, Ruth beside him, that golden voice in his ears.

"*Che farò . . . senza Euridice . . .*"

Bewildered, yet aware of the beauty of the rich notes with their passionate touch of loneliness, Mark advanced into the drawing-room.

The music faltered, then stopped abruptly. Sabine rose from the piano.

"Oh!" she looked taken aback. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vallance. I thought —" She paused. "You said for *dinner*." She gathered together hastily some sheets of music and was preparing to pass the pair when Mark turned to his companion.

"I don't think you know Mrs. Cruikshank, do you?"

"No." Ruth stared at Sabine. "How d'ye do?" Her voice was careless, her manner coolly patronizing.

Sabine made a slight inclination of her head, graceful yet full of pride.



"Would you like some tea?" she asked Mark.

"No, thanks. We've had some. But Miss Mallison found the drive a cold one, so I brought her in to thaw by the fire." He felt a little vexed with Ruth for her omission to shake hands. The trivial courtesy would not have hurt her. "I'm afraid we're interrupting your singing?"

"Oh, no. I was only practising." Sabine smiled, reading his thoughts. "I so rarely get a chance."

Ruth was studying her dress, made of some soft, blue material that hung loosely yet defined the lines of the wearer's perfect figure. It was cut a little low at the throat, and it showed the white, rounded neck on which the head with its dark hair was so proudly balanced. Regal she looked. The word flashed into Mark's mind, unbidden, as the right description. Beside her, the girl in her Harris tweed, with the velvet cap wedged crookedly over her faintly marked brows appeared elfish, a half-formed creature. The resemblance was heightened by her expression, scornful and slightly shrewish.

Before he could think of any remark to break the constrained silence, Sabine had reached the door. It closed behind her noiselessly. Mark frowned for a second, then turned to his guest.

"Well? Come and warm yourself."

Ruth followed him to the fireplace and extended a small foot in a brogued shoe to the cheerful glow.

"She sings well." There was suave impertinence in her voice. "Perhaps she has been on the stage? She looks rather theatrical."

"I don't think so." Mark spoke curtly. He divined, with a sense of discomfort, the feminine malice of the suggestion.

Ruth smiled.

"Are you fond of music?"

"Very." He leaned on the mantelpiece and stirred the topmost of the logs with the point of his crutch.

"Then, here goes!" She laughed lightly, drew off her gloves, tossed them aside and danced across to the piano. "Now, I'll sing to you!"

Dashing off the opening chords, she started, in a reedy voice,



a popular song from a *révue*. The success depended more upon the action accompanying the words than on any musical quality. She carried it off very well, barely touching the high notes and emphasizing the sentiment of the drawn-out refrain.

Again Mark was attracted by the queer mixture of childishness and precocity she exhibited. He could not make out if she understood the veiled innuendo that was supposed to add spice to the chorus. He decided that she did not. For at the conclusion she looked up, wide-eyed and ingenuous.

"I don't hear any clapping?"

Mark laughed and cried:

"Encore!"

"No. It's come much too late!" She closed the piano, shrugging her shoulders. "As I said before, you're utterly spoilt! This is the way one leaves the platform." Bowing gravely to right and left, she returned, with a dignified air to his side — a perfect piece of comedy acting. "But I'm not as tall as your housekeeper! A *prima donna* must have a 'presence'." Her lips tilted. She whispered to Mark, "And that requires — well, not only nerve, but —" She made a swift gesture suggesting ample proportions, then pressed a slender hand against her thin and childishly formed bosom. "And now, I'm off. Good-bye!" She picked up her gloves, hesitated and pounced on a little piece of fluff from the carriage rug on his coat. She examined this critically. "I thought it was — oh, never mind! Don't tell Mother I came in. After all, she mightn't like it. No, you're not to move!" Before he could stop her, hampered by his lameness, she had opened the French window and slammed it to behind her back.

He could see her running down the path. At the gate she turned and blew him a kiss. Then she was gone like a will-o'-the-wisp through the arched blue door.

A moment later he heard the trot of the horses' hoofs down the lane and caught a glimpse of the coachman's hat and whip over the grey wall. But the peace of the old room was shattered. He felt restless and very tired, at once excited and depressed.



A glimmer of white on the piano arrested his wandering glance, and he swung himself wearily across the narrow intervening space. The treasure trove proved to be a handkerchief in fine lawn, redolent of some Eastern perfume. He put it aside with a sniff of disgust. Like many men he disliked strong scents and, especially, on a woman of his own class. It warred too, with his conception of the young girl's temperament, capricious yet virginal, still sweet with the freshness of childhood.

Clever too. He fidgeted. In that slow progress from the piano, in the poise of the head and the supple swing of her youthful body had been a distinct caricature of Mrs. Cruikshank. Had Ruth deliberately mimicked her? He stared down at the ivory keys. Women were strange creatures.

On the little rosewood block that made a sliding shelf for a candle, something was shining; a further trophy but with a masculine suggestion. He was bending to examine it when the door opened and Sabine's voice caused him to look up hastily.

"Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt you." She stood, hesitant on the threshold. "I saw Miss Mallison drive away and I thought you had gone to your study. I left a ring on the piano."

"Is this it?" He held it up.

"Yes." She came forward. "It belonged to my father. I'm always afraid of losing it as it's rather large. I take it off when I play. Thank you." Gravely she slipped it on the second finger of her hand.

Mark had noticed the crest and motto. The memory of Ruth's conduct to this woman of gentle birth, shadowed by her widowhood, returned to him with inward discomfort.

"I feel tempted to suggest that you should leave the ring off *now* — if it has that desirable result? I'm so fond of good music."

She smiled.

"But you've had a concert already." There was mischief in her eyes; she had heard Ruth's performance and without the pretty mannerisms it had sounded very amateur.

"Oh, *that!*" He laughed back. "I didn't mean a popular song."



Sabine was leaning against the piano, turning the ring on her slim finger, the glow of the firelight on her hair. Her vitality, the more marked for the sense of reserved force about her, with its subtle feminine mystery, attracted the man watching her. How still she was; like some deep swift stream, her eyes brown pools touched by sunlight. She looked up and met his gaze.

"I'll sing, with pleasure. On one condition."

"And that?" Intrigued, he smiled back.

"That you'll lie down on your sofa and rest. You look worn out! Also" — her lips curved with a faint mockery — "that you'll cry '*Basta!*' the very moment you feel that you've had enough."

"I will, if the gong doesn't sound first! I promise that. Although I'm not perfectly sure that I understand what '*Basta*' means? It hasn't a very polite ring."

She settled herself on the music-stool.

"It means 'Enough!' — *forcibly*. It's what one says to a beggar in Italy when he's importunate."

Mark laughed.

"Then I guessed right! I'm much more likely to be the beggar when you begin to sing. Where's your music?"

She shook her head.

"I play without, as a rule." Her fingers drifted down the keys. "I used to sing to your aunt." She paused for a second and added softly, "To you too, so I know what you like!"

"Did you?" His eyes were full of wonder. He went back slowly to the sofa.



## CHAPTER XXIV

THE weather conspired to help Sabine. It rained with the persistency that overtakes the West Country, when the wind comes up from the sea with an Atlantic depression behind it.

Music became Mark's supreme resource. He would sit in an arm-chair by the fire, his eyes fixed on the graceful woman outlined against the piano, listening to song after song, begging for more until she, herself, would laughingly cry "*Basta!*"

Anthony, too, held a share in Mark's slow convalescence. The pair became sworn allies. With a curious mixture of emotions, Sabine would watch her son on Mark's knee, absorbed in this new and engrossing companion and using all his powers of coaxing to induce "Big Man" to "tell a 'tory."

Mark invented wonderful tales of the sea, in which mermaids and pirates figured, with palaces made of coral that held treasure from Spanish galleons, guarded by sharks and flying fish. From this grew further occupation. The creative instinct was stirred from its slumber and Mark went back to his writing.

But there were many interruptions from without, Lady Mallison and Ruth dropping in on some pretext to cheer up the wounded man. Occasionally the young girl would come alone. She invested these visits with the charm of stolen delights, cleverly screened by a childish air of mischievous impulse. Mark "mustn't tell!" It was "such fun!" She had only "popped in for a minute!"

Steve, holding Ruth's mare, would wink behind her back at Johnson; but the respect and loyalty due to the name of Vallance prevented open gossip.



The attraction of her youth and gaiety was not lost on Mark. She roused him from the heavy depression that descended on him when he brooded over his physical helplessness. She was stimulating. Unconsciously he reacted to her love of flirtation. Yet there were moments when she repelled him by her shallowness and lack of heart, though he did not analyse the impression. He told himself he was getting old, no company for twenty summers — and sighed! He was haunted, too, by a sense of responsibility. The great house at Lidding St. Mary would mean a different manner of life, and need — he shrank from the thought — an heir.

Lady Mallison had skilfully sown the seeds of the notion. The whole county looked to Mark to preserve sorely-tried traditions and pass on an ancient name. She even suggested a wife for him in the shape of a (plain) neighbour's daughter! She would smile at his silent protest when he pointed to his crutches. That would all come right in time and, if by chance his lameness persisted, in many a girl's eyes it would prove an added attraction. He had suffered for his country. She was a mother and she *knew*.

Here the perilous topic would lapse, but the speech found its mark. He caught himself studying Ruth from a new, disturbing standpoint. She roused in him unrest, not passion. But remembering the days of satiety in the company of his dead wife, the disillusion and frequent quarrels, he began to doubt whether ardent love was a supreme factor in marriage. The question of children was more important. A boy, for instance, like Anthony. To watch the faith and devotion grow in those wide eyes turned to his, and to feel young life about him? This was the cure for loneliness.

But much depended on the mother. His thoughts would wander to Mrs. Cruikshank and come up dead against the wall of her widowhood. Had she loved the dead soldier? Assuredly. She was not a woman to give herself without genuine passion, and now her heart lay in his grave. He felt a grudging dislike to the man. An Australian? This roused in him a jealousy that took the form of insular prejudice. The virile but shadowy picture of



Cruikshank stood between them when her voice filled the room with a throbbing joy or sank into a note of appeal that breathed of unhappiness. She was singing to that desolate spot marked by a wooden cross.

And, in turn, Sabine would watch Mark, trying to read in his bent face, propped on the well-shaped hand as he lounged, listening, by the fire, some subtle response, knowing him moved yet aware of an obstacle, some secret defence built about him.

Was it Ruth, she asked herself? She hated the young girl.

Dillon alone was optimistic. There was Anthony, bless his heart! And Nature at her old game — the hidden link of father and son. Mark was learning the lesson of love. It only needed courage and patience.

November came in morosely, but with stirring news from the Front and a scramble for the morning papers. As if that most uncertain factor, the English climate, had suddenly decided to be patriotic, the weather changed. In a burst of sunshine, the wet fields smiled at the sky and the hazel grove with its bare boughs was alive with the music of blackbird and thrush.

Mark had been in one of those moods which had at first startled Johnson, taciturn and moved, for no cause, to swift irritability. He had rung for her in the middle of breakfast with the old complaint. She had flounced out to inform Cook that "the master was the *limit!*"

"Fussing again about a smell — he's got apples on the brain! I'm to pull out the sideboard now, to see if one 'as slipped behind it. With the room turned out on Tuesday! It's worse than the old lady."

Cook agreed.

"He takes it from 'er. A rare one she was for *corners*, though I wouldn't speak hardly of the dead! To see her pass her hand round a saucepan you'd think I'd been poisoning the 'ouse!"

She broke off as there came a clatter of hoofs in the yard. A clear, shrill voice imperiously called for Steve.

"It's that Miss Mallison again." Johnson had flown to the window. "Setting 'er cap at Mr. Mark, and bold as brass! Now



if you and me was to call on a single man, there'd be a pretty how de do. I wonder 'er ladyship allows it."

"She's thinking of the *place*," said Cook. "And 'er daughter up at Lidding St. Mary! Well, I for one sha'n't stay if she's to be the new missus."

They watched the girl spring down and throw the reins over to Steve, turning towards the shrubbery, the apron of her habit flapping, indifferent to the effect produced by this scanty covering.

"Bold as brass," Johnson repeated. She giggled. "If I 'ad legs like hers, I wouldn't be so proud of 'em!"

"Your Fred's got better taste." The buxom cook enjoyed the jest, but Johnson, though inwardly pleased, bridled.

"Now, Milly, none of yer nonsense! Remember I'm a married woman. I must get to my pantry now — this sunshine shows up the silver. Later, if you'll give me a hand, we'll pull out that old sideboard. And *leave* it out!" Her face was vindictive.

Cook, resenting the slur upon her single state, retaliated.

"Then you'd best sweep be'ind it first. Marriage 'asn't improved yer *work*."

Meanwhile Ruth had found her way to the front door which stood open, letting in the welcome warmth. She broke, unannounced, into Mark's study.

"Hello!" Her gay voice startled him where he sat at his work before scattered sheets of manuscript.

"Why, Ruth!" He blinked at her with the lost expression of the author recalled from the pleasant world of imagination to that of fact.

"Yes, '*Ruth*'!" She mimicked him and advanced, a mischievous smile on her face. "I *had* to come — such wonderful news! What will you give me for it, Mark?" She looked very fresh and young, a soft colour in her cheeks, due to excitement and exercise. The plain, dark habit suited her and, under her riding hat, her hair shone like floss silk.

As he hesitated she swung herself up on the corner of his writing table and laughed into his solemn face.



"*The* most wonderful news," she repeated, surveying a slender calf encased in a brown top boot. "State your price?"

Mark recovered his wits.

"What would you like?" He studied her with a mischievous expression, tempted by her proximity. He had only to stretch out his right arm and he had her at his mercy. A sudden recklessness possessed him. Why not? Here was a charm against his recurrent moods of depression — youth and health and high spirits.

She watched him under her fair lashes. As he leaned nearer, playfully, with her riding whip, she fenced him off.

"I'll be generous and tell you first. Hold your breath! The Armistice was signed at five o'clock this morning."

"Never!" The unexpected news sobered him. Instinctively he straightened his shoulders. "Thank God! Have you any details? How did you hear?"

"Colonel Baird telephoned to father whilst we were having breakfast. From the camp — it's official. I mounted Dinah and galloped off to the Cathcarts'. And then" — she smiled — "I thought of you. Isn't it splendid?"

Mark nodded.

"So Roger's safe?" Instinctively his mind had turned to her home circle and to his little friend, Babs.

"Yes, we hope so." She spoke lightly. Was it courage or indifference? She had never seemed troubled about her brother. Before he could thrust aside the doubt, she went on with more feeling in the eager girlish voice. "So are you! There's no chance *now* of your being sent back to the Front."

"There never was." He smiled grimly.

"Oh, I don't know! But it's such a *relief*! I always dread a man going back who's been wounded twice — there seems a fatality about it." She shuddered. "That's why — I'm so happy."

Here was the right opening for sentiment, offered him ingenuously — or so he thought! Then why did a wave of indecision flood him, cooling his desire and checking the words on his lips?

He could feel a certain tension about her, and his own dis-



## THE BREATHLESS MOMENT

comfort mounting up. Desperately he looked past her through the window, avoiding her eyes. On the paved path to the gate stood a mail cart with Anthony in it and the faithful Dillon in attendance. Beyond them Sabine hovered, seeing her son off for his outing. Bareheaded, she bent down and drew the rug tighter about him, then, yielding to a sudden impulse, tenderly kissed the little fellow. Her face, when she raised it, seemed to shine with the glory of motherhood. Mark instinctively caught his breath, the veil at last torn from his eyes. Here was his true ideal. A woman of fine mental power, beautiful and talented, yet above all things a mother — that sacred word which holds for a man the echo of his childhood joys and the only victory over death: a living claim on the future.

He was torn ruthlessly from his dream by a sharp ejaculation.

"Ah!" Ruth had followed his gaze. All her hysterical spite leaped forth. "Your housekeeper! It seems to me she has a pretty easy time. Do you let her go out the front way?"

He turned, confused and aware of his silent discourtesy.

"I'm sorry. I was — thinking," he stammered. "Mrs. Cruikshank? Yes, of course."

He was startled by the girl's expression. She looked venomous, her lip caught between her sharp white teeth, her nostrils scornfully dilated. She reminded him of his dead wife in one of her violent fits of temper.

His brain worked swiftly. What an escape! He forced a laugh, disconcerted yet conscious of a strange excitement.

"You see what I am! Your splendid news sent me promptly into the clouds. That's what comes of living alone! I haven't even thanked you yet."

"I don't want thanking." Moodily she watched him under her pale lashes. "Of course, I thought of you *first*. A wounded soldier and — old friend."

"It was a real proof of friendship." He struggled on, subtly aware that he had failed her at the crisis, yet resisting the impression. "I sha'n't forget it. Don't you think we ought to celebrate the occasion? Is it too early for Sloe gin? There's some



## THE BREATHLESS MOMENT

at my aunt made long before we dreamed of war. I'll ring for Johnson —"

But Ruth checked him, as he was rising.

"No, thanks. I must be off. I want to carry the news to the rector. I saw his son yesterday in the Sandy Lane with your Mrs. Cruikshank. Flirting!" She gave her shallow laugh, her narrowed eyes fixed on Mark. "I nearly gave him Sam Weller's advice — to beware of widows — but refrained, as I thought it was unsportsmanlike!" She slipped down off the table and adjusted her skirt. "So long!" then paused, and added plaintively, "What about my reward?"

"You shall have it! The very next time that I go to Exeter. What would you like?"

She pouted. "I can't wait." Her eyes met his daringly.

"If there's anything you fancy at Pratt's?" Mark suggested provokingly. The next moment he felt the flick of her riding whip across his hand, already raised to bid her good-bye.

"I'm not a child! You deserved it." She stood there quivering with anger, hardly aware of her actions.

Mark rose and reached for his crutches.

"I daresay I did." He hid his annoyance and smiled down into the flushed face from his superior height. "Give your mother my love and sincere congratulations. She must be thankful about Roger. Where's your horse?"

She did not answer, but moved away. She was conscious now of her folly. She heard the tap of his crutches behind her and turned on the threshold of the room to play forlornly her last card.

"I can't give a message. I should get into dreadful trouble if Mother knew that I came to see you — like this — alone."

He checked the retort on his tongue, that she did it without his invitation. Her change of moods, which he had found but lately so diverting, now produced exasperation. He tried to assume a fatherly air.

"Then I don't think we ought to risk it. Nice as it is to see you."



"It's a little late to consider that!" she flashed back. "However, I don't suppose to-day *anyone* could find fault. Besides I was only in fun! After all these years — it's too absurd! I shall run in again before long to see if you've got all your flags out. Can't you come to us for the week-end and join in the celebrations? I'll suggest to Father that he should ask you."

"Thanks very much." His voice was dry. "I'm afraid it's impossible. I'm due at Exeter on Monday. I'm still under treatment there."

He breathed more freely when at last they reached the porch, seeing the end of the interview. Haunting him was a sense of escape but he did not wish for a definite rupture with the daughter of his old friends. A further possibility that he dared not yet consider gave him the queer feeling of looking on at some comedy, a disinterested spectator. Had he ever admired Ruth? Impossible! He glanced round him. The garden was empty. Over the wall he could hear Dillon replying to Anthony's urgent questions as she wheeled him down towards the sea, an indistinct murmur, interrupted by the squeaking of a wheel. "I must oil that," thought Mark. Ruth had passed out of his mind.

Steve brought round the mare and mounted the visitor. She fussed over the set of her skirt, covertly watching Mark as he leaned up against the doorway.

He seemed to awake from a dream.

"Well, thank you so much for coming. You've told Steve, I can see!"

For the youth's face was radiant. He was on the eve of being called up and the news had seemed a miracle. He grinned at his master, touching his cap, and obeyed Ruth's nod of dismissal as she gathered up the reins.

"Yes." She seemed to hesitate. "I didn't hurt your hand, did I? It was really — an accident." Her voice was lowered, her eyes wistful.

"Oh, *that!*" He laughed lightly. "I'm not made of sugar candy. I took it as a pledge of Peace!"

"Then you'll forgive me?"



"My dear child!"

Piqued, she touched up the mare, already fretting at the bit. Dinah bounded forward.

"Good-bye, *papa!*" She was off with this last futile shaft, leaning back in the saddle and instinctively tightening the curb, ready to inflict on the horse punishment for the faults of man. Before she reached the end of the lane, Mark had regained the house.

He was greeted by sounds of woe issuing from the dining-room and a quiet voice soothing Johnson on the verge of hysterics. Sabine, kneeling by the girl, who had collapsed in Mark's chair, looked up and met his gaze. She answered his unspoken question.

"A little upset — that's all. She's been worrying about her husband with all this heavy fighting lately. But good news never kills." Her eyes, grave and compassionate, went back to the soldier's wife. "Does it, Johnson? So, dry your tears. You'll soon have your Fred home. Won't that be nice?" She slipped an arm round the servant's waist and helped her up. "We must go and tell Cook now."

Mark watched the pair pass him. He felt a lump rise in his throat. He glanced at Sabine. She nodded:

"Splendid!"

Peace. It had already come to his house with the presence of this woman, strong yet tender and merciful. How blind he had been these long grey weeks.

Restless, he wandered to the porch. His mind was revolving round the fact of her widowhood. There had been no signs about her of any acute personal grief. At a moment too, when thoughts must turn towards the army of the dead. He had the swift intuition that now was the time to test the strength of the memories that held her bound. He could not wait! He smiled grimly, remembering his indecision of an hour ago, facing Ruth. He sat down, listening for her step. He would know it in a thousand; that light tread, the faint rustle of her skirts as she moved, swift and sure, through his house, but with no sense of disturbance.



He pictured her at Lidding St. Mary, on the terrace sacred to the peacocks, a little child in her arms.

Mark, in his dress clothes — that seemed to have shrunk unaccountably — was waiting in the drawing-room. There had been a strenuous interval of decanting the old port. He would not trust it to Johnson, now recovered and voluble, but uncertain in her actions. For this was to be a notable dinner. To celebrate the occasion, he had begged for Sabine's company. The excuse seemed heaven-sent.

"I shall dress," he had told her, smiling. "Put on your best bib and tucker! And tell the gardener to rifle the greenhouse. Couldn't we be reckless to-night and eat up all the meat for the week? They must have a feast in the kitchen too — I'll see about wine. Friends, if they like." To himself he added, "Keep 'em quiet," and rejoiced in his diplomacy.

But now, nervousness possessed him. He was worried about his tie and the strain across his broad shoulders. He wished he had stayed in khaki. Those confounded crutches, for instance. A man looked a fool in evening dress, hobbling about on a pair of sticks!

His annoyance had reached its height when the door opened and Sabine appeared. He wheeled round from his gloomy stare in the looking-glass and his frown vanished.

Lovely she was, from head to foot, with a little air of shyness about her that added a new and youthful charm.

His eyes ran over her and widened as he noted the pearls about her neck, a beautiful ring on her right hand, and, indistinctly, the rich though subdued effect of her silver-grey gown.

Her shoulders were veiled, but the film of chiffon could not disguise their perfect shape nor the ivory whiteness of her skin. Regal she looked, a half smile curving the beautiful vivid lips.

"Shall I do?" She dropped him a court curtsy.

"You look —" He stammered, and caught himself up. "Like the Dove of Peace!"

She laughed lightly.



"So long as it isn't a Gull," she suggested. "Do you remember Henrietta?"

"I do — to my cost! What's become of her?"

"I believe she's 'improving' Park Lane." Sabine drew nearer to the fire and stretched out a hand to the blaze where the light played on her ring, a Brazilian diamond, faintly yellow. It had belonged to her mother and had once graced royal fingers. "Lady Gull has been giving dances for American officers in town, Henrietta assisting her as she says 'it keeps them out of temptation'."

"It would," said Mark, "if they danced with her."

"But they dance with Lady Gull too." Sabine gave him a mischievous glance. "She's learning all the new steps. Tiring, she says, but 'good for the figure'."

"Do you correspond?"

"Hardly! But she wrote last week. 'On a matter of business' — to quote Henrietta's favourite phrase. Her ladyship finds, with her social work, she has no time for domestic affairs. So many people want to know her. So she's looking for a house-keeper. She threw out a broad hint in my direction and added — as a compliment, I imagine — that, with valuables in the house, she liked to know something about her staff."

"I never heard such impertinence!" Mark looked furious.

"She didn't mean it," said Sabine simply.

In the silence that followed, the gong rang. Mark could not guess what lay behind this lightly-told and trivial story. It afforded a safety-valve for her pride.

For Dillon alone was optimistic. This was to be the day of days! The Armistice left the old woman cold. Her sympathies moved in a narrower circle. Unknown to her mistress, she had stitched into a fold of the grey gown the worn medallion of a Saint, filched from a bog oak rosary. It could do no harm, she decided, with the secret belief that Sabine's "charm" was quite sufficient in itself if the Powers of Good were too busy elsewhere. She scoffed at her darling's secret fear which concerned Ruth and an engagement to be announced that very night, heralding Sabine's own departure, and covered by this kindly dinner.



With her resolute pride, she had eased a way to the parting. Lady Gull would engage her. Mark need feel no hesitation in announcing the news of his marriage. But, seated at the well-laid table, Sabine caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror behind her host and a wave of rebellion flooded her. For the first time since his return she reverted to the scenes of her girlhood, heedless of Johnson's curious glances as she talked with her old brilliancy of the life she had led with her father. To-night, at least, she would be herself, Mark's equal, ahead of him in worldly experience, a companion fit for the wealthy Squire.

As the meal progressed, her spirits rose. She was warmed by a sense of triumph. She roused not only amazement in Mark but a barely concealed admiration. They were united by the sense of belonging to the same world, the close link of inherited instincts. All the time, as wonder grew in Mark's heart, joy grew with it and a strange new humility. With this fund of social experience how had she borne this quiet life, serene and outwardly contented? His "housekeeper"! He flinched at the thought. He recalled Ruth's shrill voice. "Do you let her go out the front way?" He could have knelt, for Sabine's pardon.

At last coffee was handed round. Mark made a suggestion.

"Let's have it by the drawing-room fire. Then Johnson can clear quickly and they can settle down to supper."

Sabine agreed, with a little thrill of apprehension. What was coming? Her heart was beating rapidly as she led the way to the quiet old room.

"You needn't trouble to fetch the cups," Mark said with an upward glance at Johnson, holding out the tray. "You can drink to Peace undisturbed. Have you everything you want?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Johnson, bursting with news, departed. Cook would say that Mrs. Cruikshank had been "telling tarradiddles"! A yacht? And all them swell visits, and friends at foreign embassies?

Then what was she doing here, "drawing her wages regular" and married to a private soldier? Not even a sergeant! It didn't fit in. P'raps the champagne had gone to her head? She'd have



to "step down in the morning!" *Swank!* It was the master's fault having her in "like that" to dinner. But she wasn't a bad sort, all told — free-handed, and the same height. Didn't "rag out" her clothes, either.

There was silence in the drawing-room. Mark broke it awkwardly:

"I suppose I'm allowed to smoke?" He drew out his cigarettes.

She nodded, staring into the fire, from her chair on the other side of the rug.

"Will you sing to me by and by, just to make the evening perfect?"

"If you feel like music." Her voice was light.

"I do — and I don't." His lips twitched.

She glanced at him.

"You're not in pain?"

He stared, his current of thought broken. His face cleared.

"Oh, you mean my ankle? No, though it worries me in a different way." He leaned forward, the cigarette still unlit between his fingers. "I'm going to ask you a straight question. Do you think that a man, placed as I am, with obvious disabilities, has any right to dream of marriage? Is it fair on the woman?"

He saw the colour ebb from her face.

"I should say it depended on the — girl." She controlled her voice with an effort. "Most girls nowadays would be proud to marry a wounded soldier and you have a great deal to offer." She went on hurriedly, "That sounds horribly prosaic. Of course the real test is — love."

"Mine or hers?"

"Both," said Sabine.

"There's no doubt about mine."

In the husky words was a ring of passion that awoke vivid memories. Sabine could bear the strain no longer.

"You're trying to tell me of your engagement? That you have no further use for me." She rose to her feet, her head flung back. "I understand. It's — natural."

Unconsciously her hand was pressed to her bosom. The great



diamond caught the light with the throb of her breath. She made a blind, stumbling movement forward and stopped with a sharp cry. For Mark, utterly forgetful, had sprung from his chair and stood swaying, without his crutches.

"Oh, take care!" Her arms went out protectingly in an agony of solicitude that drove caution from her heart. "Mark! You'll fall!"

At the sound of his name on her lips and the loving grasp of her hands, he lost all vestige of control.

"Sabine!" He clung to her, his head bending to her own.

Half-supporting his body, she could feel him tremble as his mouth desperately sought hers and catch the little broken sob between his kisses. In a mist that swept away time and space she gave herself up to his passion.

. . . . .

When sanity returned to her, she found she was kneeling by his chair, her hands on his shoulders, her eyes wet.

"Then it isn't Ruth?" All the jealousy of the past weeks rang out in the words.

"Heaven forbid! It's you — if you'll have me? A cripple. Can you stand it, Sabine?"

"I'm proud — proud!" Her voice choked. "My soldier — who has fought — and *conquered*."

"But lost his memory," he persisted.

A curious look crossed her face.

"The past is past. We have the future."

He gave a sharp sigh of relief.

"It's the past that has been scaring me," he said simply. "I wasn't sure."

"In what way?" Her eyes narrowed.

"I was afraid that you might have loved Cruikshank too deeply to marry again."

A mad desire to laugh seized her, but she resisted it with a growing sense of confusion. She looked down, vaguely frightened. Should she tell him the whole truth? No. It would tarnish all



the beauty of this fresh and wonderful romance. She could hear Elizma's voice, sweet and grave and full of promise.

"Both of you *free* . . . in all honour."

In her thankfulness it seemed an insult to the Power that had led her through tangled ways to this hour, forgiving the breathless moment.

Some day she would confess. For Anthony's sake. Not yet.

"We were only together a month," she whispered.

Surprised but relieved, he nodded gravely.

"You love *me*, now?"

"With all my heart."

"And you'll marry me soon?"

"If you're quite sure —" She paused. "What will your friends say?"

"They'll honour you — or cease to be friends." He spoke sternly, remembering Ruth. "Besides, why should they not be pleased? If my father had been living he would have welcomed you — my mother too — to Lidding St. Mary."

She smiled proudly, seeing the light of truth in Mark's blue eyes. It was no empty compliment. Then a cloud shadowed her face.

"And Anthony?" She held her breath. "I — *couldn't* part from Anthony!"

He stooped and kissed her, smoothing back a little tendril of dark hair that had drifted loose from the smooth mass.

"It was your love for Anthony that opened my eyes to my own state. I believe I'm as fond of him as you are."

Her arms stole up round his neck.

"Then if we shouldn't —"

He guessed her thought.

"He'd be Anthony *Vallance*, and fill my place."



## CHAPTER XXV

IT was this utterance of Mark's that kept Sabine's lips sealed in the happy days that followed — or so she persuaded herself! Anthony was safeguarded. She refused to look beyond the present or disturb the still waters around her; those waters of Lethe in which no ripple from the stone thrown in heedless youth dimmed the mirror of their love.

In vain Elizma, let into the secret, wrote and implored her friend to clear up the mystery, for the sake of the child and their future life. Though at times she was tempted to take this advice, Sabine chose the pleasant path. She divined that Mark was still inclined to be jealous of the phantom husband. The initial lie called for others, or evasive silences that exasperated the crippled man, sensitive over the "lost years." His "queer moods," as Johnson called them, persisted at intervals. Sabine put them down to shell shock. But, in between, she noticed changes in the man's character, a hardening of his sympathies and a Calvinistic attitude that matched the stern morality preached by his dead aunt.

A case in the village underlined this unforeseen tendency; that of a new tenant who had posed as a soldier's wife, the fraud detected through the absence of separation allowance.

Mark had investigated the matter. It had ended in a week's notice to quit the cottage by the ferry. He would listen to no appeal for mercy. She was a pernicious influence, and Liddingcombe should not shelter her. The fact that the woman, a stranger from Plymouth, had confessed the truth, under pressure, with the tearful assurance that her lover was only waiting for home leave to return and marry her, left him unmoved. She must



go, with her baby. A good riddance! This was his verdict. Surely Sabine agreed with him?

She did not. His unconscious hypocrisy nettled her. But it emphasized the need for caution. She must choose her moment carefully. With the Fane casuistry she dismissed the village incident. She was more than ever in love with Mark and dazzled by her good fortune. To have recaptured not only the man but the tender reverence that had marked the early days of their courtship, with the ardour of unsatisfied passion, revived her own youthfulness. It was indeed a "new romance," and she yielded to the strong temptation. She could not tell him — not just yet. From day to day she postponed the confession.

The engagement was kept a secret, another fact that Elizma deplored. But the moment that it was given out Sabine would have to leave Mark's house, together with Anthony and Dillon, in deference to convention. To avoid a long parting they decided to withhold the announcement until a week before the wedding. It was to be from Elizma's house in London, a quiet affair with no invitations, but bearing the social stamp of the Taverners' well-known position. They would spend their honeymoon in town and collect sufficient furniture there to render a move to Lidding St. Mary practicable in the near future. Already Mark had commenced indoor renovations to efface Lady Gull's rococo taste. The "mustard pot," bare and serene, held a secret in its vaulted roof. For part of the ancient tapestry had been recovered. Once again, faded lords and ladies would ride in doublet and hose and veiled head-dress through dappled forests, lank hounds beside them, into a vista of worn canvas.

Sabine spent happy hours wandering through the fine old rooms that re-echoed to the tap of Mark's crutches, planning, dreaming.

But workmen were scarce, involving patience. The Taverners too, were off to Polrennick, to prepare for a busy Christmas among the nuns and their new patients. This brought the date inexorably to the first week of the New Year.

Mark had been for the last time to Exeter, his treatment finished, and had come up before the Board with the result antici-



pated. Time might strengthen the damaged member, but his weight was a handicap and he was still doomed to crutches. The lapse in his memory was beyond human aid, but it troubled him far less now. He stood on the brink of a new life, no longer alone but ably supported, and the past seemed immaterial. Only one shadow dimmed his joy. He knew it for an absurd obsession, but the phantom of Cruikshank haunted him, filling him with jealousy. His unconscious autocracy resented the thought of a predecessor.

"Did I ever meet him?" he asked Sabine, one afternoon, in the sheltered lee of the old boat-house where she stood close beside his wheel chair. He had grudgingly adopted this means of progression on learning that he could propel himself.

"No." She was looking seawards, watching the great rollers sweep towards them on the disused jetty, half-hypnotized by the ceaseless swell, flecked with foam, as the marching hosts flung out white banners in the sunshine.

"Nor my aunt?"

She shook her head.

"It was quite a sudden affair. Away from here — in the Isle of Wight." She spoke with a touch of impatience, her face sombre. "Why do you ask?"

Mark laid a hand on hers, resting on the narrow wheel guard.

"You'll laugh at me! I know it's mad, but I hate the very thought of him." His voice was full of a deep resentment. "I hate the idea of your having loved him, and — well, of course, there's Anthony!"

"I never loved him so well as you."

His fingers tightened. He leaned towards her.

"You *mean* that?" He studied her face for a moment, then laughed with a bitter note. "You're only saying it out of kindness because I'm tied to this damned chair. I know you!"

She swung round.

"I'm not! I've always loved you best." His jealousy had aroused in her a passionate impulse upsetting caution. "That is —" She bit her lip, confused.



Mark's blue eyes went wide. He was a prey to rising excitement.

"I don't understand. Were we — no, that's absurd! I was married then. You mean to say that you liked me first — really liked me — *before* you met him?" As she did not answer, he broke out, with a sick man's irritation, "You're hiding something. What is it, Sabine? It's not fair when I can't remember. For heaven's sake be frank with me!"

"There's nothing more than I said. I've always been — fond of you. We were — great friends." Her voice faltered.

"Do you mean that we loved each other in the old days? That you *knew* it? Then why on earth did you marry Cruikshank?"

His anger swept her off her feet.

"I didn't."

"*What?*"

He seized her wrist in a grip like a vice and she cried out.

"You're hurting me, Mark!"

He paid no attention, though instinctively his fingers loosened.

"Is that the *truth*?"

She nodded her head.

"But if you didn't marry Cruikshank — Good God!" He stared at her, aghast.

She read in his eyes the unspoken question that was torturing him and answered it.

"Yes. Anthony's — like that."

For now was the moment. She was stirred to the depths by this unforeseen climax and her courage rose. Unconsciously a faint smile curved her lips. He would know, at last, what she had suffered; in silence, too proud to claim her rights outside the kingdom of his love.

But, before she could utter the words on her lips, Mark had flung aside her hand. With a fierce movement he turned the wheels of his chair, backing away from her. All his strength was in the action. Dazed, she watched him quickly receding. Now he had turned and was passing the boards where the blistered tar



gave out the scent that is incense to those who love the waters, and the wind caught him, lifting his cap which careered wildly across the shingle. Bareheaded, his broad shoulders straining, he reached the end of the lane and the shelter of the long grey wall.

"*Mark!*" Her voice followed him with a ring of amazement and despair.

But he did not pause or turn his head. The smile on her face had been her undoing.

She stood there in the sudden grip of mental and physical exhaustion. Her limbs felt numb; the scene spun round her. She collapsed on to a coil of rope, fighting against the deadly faintness that threatened to overpower her senses. Through the grey veil before her eyes she was still painfully aware of that crablike progress up the lane until Mark vanished beneath the archway. He had gone — and with him the last pale gleam of the hope that a short hour ago had been rooted in his faith and love.

Slowly sensation returned to her. With a crude nakedness the black outline of the boat-house against the red soil of the road took on distinct lines; the beach was again broken by rocks, every pebble smooth and distinct. She pressed a hand to her hot forehead trying to concentrate her thoughts.

Mark had judged her — without mercy! She shivered. The look upon his face when he had desperately clutched the wheels, his whole soul bent on flight, had been worse than any actual blow. He had waited for no explanation, believing the utmost evil of her.

She felt outraged by his conduct; her pride sought vainly a support.

The "wrath of a self-righteous man" — her lips curled. She thought of Miss Vallance. She could hear again that fanatic voice: "Can any right come out of wrong?" And Mark, cool and arrogant: "We never discuss the war, Miss Fane."

No! She struck her knee with her hand, tightly clenched, in her rising anger. They never discussed anything. They *judged*, with their blind intolerance and traditional autocracy, heedless of the rights of others, sinners themselves yet merciless.



The worst side of her nature was roused.

"He shall pay for this." She drew in her breath sharply between her set lips. The soft tang of the sea air fitted her mood, and the wild sea horses, galloping up from the horizon, yielding to no will but their own, were fellow spirits, urging her to a breathless defiance of man-made laws. "When he *knows*, the tables will be turned. He must come to me for mercy then! He shall suffer too. But he sha'n't know yet. That shall be his punishment."

She leaned forward, clasping her knees, her eyes fixed on the wide expanse. The word had touched a hidden spring of memory. Elizma had said that there were no punishments, only "cause and effect." If so — her mind groped backwards — how had all this come to pass? She sought for a definite starting-point.

With a scorn for cant as exemplified by Mark's words compared with his actions, she dismissed the theory of its being the outcome of her fall. That had been physical, a blind pursuance of nature's laws. But the deceit involved? The long trifling with the truth, lie upon lie, the tacit acceptance of respect where no respect was due, as the saddened "widow" left in power and looked on by the villagers as an example of all that was best in the ruling class; accepted, too, by friends like the Cathcarts and Taverners, deceiving them in the years of success — what of this? Her eyes narrowed. Here was the sin against the spirit.

She probed still deeper. How had she stooped to this perilous subterfuge? Through pride — she did not spare herself in the pitiless analysis. Not the clean pride of her girlhood — which had been based on the knowledge that, save for the hasty inconsequence of childish temper, confessed and forgiven, her life presented a fair page that all might read — but the pride of power, the deadliest form of vanity.

And pride had wrecked her castle of dreams. What remained out of the *débâcle*?

Love had gone under and faith with it. Even now, facing Mark, she could not hold up her head. There were fresh lies to recant, lies told since her engagement. She had yielded to the



old temptation, the smooth path of material joys, disguising the ugly facts. And he was not the old Mark of their first passionate month at Niton but a new, hardened, war-weary man with inherited prejudices. He would be forced to forgiveness when he learnt his share of the secret romance, but would he forget? Could he trust her word in the long years that lay before them?

Anthony too. When he grew to manhood, would he understand and forgive his parents? Youth was severe and narrow in judgment. Sabine remembered her own disdain for Fane's weakness towards her sex. To stand condemned in the eyes of her son? She thrust the future away from her, dismayed, and returned to the present: Mark, and Mark's attitude.

She knew that the resurrection of all that was sweet in their intercourse was due to his idealised conception of her character; above all, to her love for the child. Now her motherhood was tarnished. She tried to rear up the old defences. It was Mark who had lowered her girlhood standard, who had taught her the physical side of love. But with the veil torn from her eyes she saw that the excuse was hollow. The stronger will had been hers in the past, overriding his objections. She had brought all her charm to bear on her lover, smoothing the way for him up to the "breathless moment." Now she must pay — with her whole lifetime.

The tide was coming in fast. A wave bolder than the rest challenged the end of the broken pier, to be split in twain with a column of water that rose and scattered in wild spray.

It drenched Sabine where she sat and she sprang to her feet, shivering. She felt chilled to the bone. Yet she could not return to Mark's house with her mind in a state of chaos. She must think things out alone, unaided. She followed the snake-like track of his wheels until she reached the sea-road, then turned to the right and quickened her pace as she neared the first white cottages. A mongrel with a long tail ran out from the last and barked at her, to be called back by its owner, an aged dame with scanty hair, snow-white, drawn into a black net.

Sabine knew the woman well; a grandmother, yet still bound to



the drudgery of daily toil, poor but proud in her own fashion, under no debt to her neighbours. She stood within the narrow doorway, her bleached old face uplifted, expectant. From the puckered mouth, long innocent of teeth, came a respectful greeting and simultaneously she "dipped," the rheumatic knees bent in a curtsy.

It seemed the last mockery in Sabine's present mood; the tribute rendered unto a Cæsar who had wilfully bartered away his crown.

With a murmured response, she hurried on.

Across the gulf of years she could see herself on this very road driving, erect, beside Steve, as he whipped up the grey pony and the trunk jolted in the rear, receiving the same mark of respect that was due to a guest of the Vallances.

A lump rose in her throat. That girl — how far away she seemed! With her eager eyes and untouched heart; above all, her clean young soul.

If this were not "punishment"? She stumbled, the hot tears blinding her and caught herself up breathlessly, her face set towards Lidding Moor.

. . . . .  
Elizma was practising in the long, bare room on the top floor that was sacred to her music. Under the fine Erard piano, which had been her husband's wedding present, a wire-haired terrier fitfully dozed, one eye wide open. At moments when the violin wailed on a high note he would raise his head uneasily and growl deep down in his throat.

Harmonics were his pet aversion. He divined, not without logic, that they were the pet ghosts of melody, and the hair would rise along his spine. Music was quite nerve-racking enough without occult disturbances!

The door opened and Taverner entered hastily, a frown on his face.

"Elizma, you *promised!*"

She broke off with a quick glance at the clock.

"I know. But it's only half past three."



"It's nearly five." His voice was severe. He crossed the room impatiently. "This thing's stopped — you might have guessed it."

A little smile curved her lips.

"Did you wind it up on Sunday?" As he hesitated, she burst out laughing. "And then you go blaming me!"

His face relaxed. Obediently she was tucking "Pietro" away in his case.

"I wonder Muff didn't warn you." He stooped to pat the little dog who, fully aware that his trial was over, had crept out from his hiding-place.

"He did, twice. He hates Bach."

"Barks back?" Taverner had the grace to look ashamed of the joke. "Now then, you'll lie down. Pluffles is bringing tea up here." He tucked a cushion under her head, then bent and kissed her rather gravely. "Honestly, I don't want you to overdo it just now. It's a strain practising all that time — waving your arms about."

"Just as if I were a windmill!" She made a mutinous face at her husband. "I practised every day *for hours* before Roger-Lee was born."

"And paid for it," said Taverner dryly.

She nodded.

"Well, I'll give in. Only, you must wind the clocks!"

"I'll bring up 'Old Eternity.' Then there can be no collusion." He referred to a favourite time-piece that ticked on for a whole year without human intervention. Lady Maud Welkinshaw had sent it to Taverner one Christmas with the excuse that its "anatomical effect" fitted it for a surgeon's house. Its glass case shamelessly exposed all its inner works.

"Then don't blame me," said Elizma demurely, "if the baby has wheels instead of a tummy."

Taverner checked the retort on his lips, grinning, for Pluffles was at the door. He came in with the tea-tray, breathing hard from the steep stairs. Pluffles was putting on weight.

"For h'you, madam." He presented a letter that had topped the erection on its carefully balanced salver.



"Thanks." Elizma tore it open. She skimmed the first page rapidly and gave a startled ejaculation.

Taverner looked up from a slice of cake which he was breaking into pieces for a game with Muff, already erect on his hind quarters.

"Anything wrong?"

She nodded, frowning, and waited for Pluffles to depart.

That devoted servitor took the hint patiently with a furtive tweak to the tea-cloth which was crooked and offended his eye. The baize door closed behind him.

"It's from Sabine. She's in dreadful trouble," Elizma explained rapidly. "She has told him, but only a part. That's the worst of it! A shocking muddle. And now he's gone."

"Gone where?"

"She doesn't know. He had left the house when she got back from a long walk. Just packed a suit-case and ordered the dog-cart for the station. No one knows his address. He said he'd been called away on business, and since then she hasn't heard. You'd better read it for yourself. Poor girl, she's utterly broken."

Taverner took the double pages, closely covered by hurried writing, and settled down to his task. He looked up, after a minute.

"Don't you worry — have your tea. Why should they all come bothering *you*?" There was resentment in his voice. "It's her own fault from start to finish. She should have been honest with the man."

"I know." Elizma sounded hopeless. She began to fill the cups before her.

Taverner absently reached out a hand and took a gulp of the hot tea.

"A pair of fools!" He folded the letter and handed it back, then smiled at his wife. "Cheer up! It's bound to come right in the end. My sympathy is all with Vallance. It must have been a nasty knock. He's been brought up in a narrow circle, tied to his aunt's apron-strings — they're always the hardest class to deal with — and naturally he's dumbfounded. He still believes there



has been a Cruikshank and that Anthony is the result of a passing fancy on Sabine's part. He's in poor health, which makes it worse. His absence needn't worry you. He has gone away to think things over."

"He might have left his address." Elizma took the feminine point of view.

"Then Sabine would have followed him, or written. He realized that. My dear"— he laid a hand on her knee — "you can't make men on a woman's pattern. There are times when they must be alone. I can understand how Vallance felt. He's faced with a drastic decision."

"But he *needn't* be. That's what annoys me! I wish I could go down and help — if only by keeping Sabine safe from a fresh mad impulse." Elizma gave a sigh of impatience.

"So you can," said Taverner gently. "I was going to tell you, after tea, that I've had a letter from Polrennick which will alter all our plans for Christmas. They've influenza in the house and it's spreading — unluckily. It will have to run its course, but I'm not going to let you and the child stay there — not at present. No good going into infection deliberately if it can be avoided. I was wondering if we could get the Ferry House again for a month? I could stay a few days at Liddingcombe and then run over to Polrennick. How would you like the idea?"

"Oh, Orde!" Her face lit up. "It's the very thing, providential!" She paused. "Are they really bad at Polrennick? I don't like deserting them."

"They've some serious cases, with pneumonia, but no deaths, so far. It wouldn't do for Roger-Lee. You'd be wiser to stay at Liddingcombe. Besides they've enough work to do, without visitors. It doesn't matter about me, but they'll make preparations for you, and all the village will troop up and help to spread the epidemic."

His tact produced the desired result. He had learnt his lesson with Elizma. Appeal to her reason and she was won.

"No. You're right. I'm not really wanted." She frowned at her husband. "*Must* you go?"



"It doesn't make any difference. I'm in the thick of it in London. I'm not afraid — that's the best protection." He changed the subject. "I'll write to-night and use all my powers of persuasion to secure the Ferry House. It's a dear little place. We'll take old Pluffles. He deserves a holiday. I asked him the other day if he wasn't getting tired of London —"

Elizma interrupted:

"And he replied 'Not 'h'at h'all'! Didn't he now?"

Taverner laughed. "Probably. I can't remember."

The door opened on the words.

"H'if you please, sir, a Mr. h'Inman would like to see you. He hasn't an h'appointment, sir." Pluffles, aspiring wildly, stood, a stout figure, on the threshold.

"I'll come. Ask him to wait a minute." Taverner held out his cup to Elizma for a fresh supply. "And, look here, Pluffles, I'm arranging to go down into Devonshire with Mrs. Taverner for Christmas. I think I shall need you there."

"Very good, sir." Pluffles' face was a mask of studied indifference.

"You'd rather stay in London, perhaps?"

"No, sir. Not h'at h'all."

Taverner choked over his tea. He dared not look at Elizma. His face was red when he raised it.

"Ever done any fishing, Pluffles?"

"H'yes, sir." A faint smile came and went in a flash on the impassive countenance.

"And what about bathing?"

Pluffles looked mournful.

"No sir. I'm not partial to it." He unbent. "It doesn't h'agree with me, sir. Not in cold weather — the h'after h'effects."

"I see." Taverner's mouth was twitching. "Perhaps you're wise."

Pluffles retired.

Elizma had caught up Muff, her face buried in his coat. As the baize door closed she gave a sob of relief, the signal for her pent-up mirth.



"I'd like to see old Pluffles fishing." Taverner gave her a wicked glance. "On a rough day with a heavy swell. It would be a test for his dignity."

He got up regretfully and glanced at his watch.

"You'll stay there until it's nearly time for dinner? Just to please me."

She nodded, smiling.

"If I may write one line to Sabine?"

"Well — I'll allow that." He paused in the doorway. "Give her my love and tell her to cheer up, and remember — this is important — that she's dealing with a sick man."

"You mean a crippled one?" said Elizma.

"No. What I said. I'll tell you later. I've my own idea on the subject."



## CHAPTER XXVI

**A**NTHONY stood at his nursery window watching occasional flakes of snow drift down on to the wet lawn and vanish, leaving no trace behind. Where did they go? He pondered on this for a space and gave up the weighty problem. Breathing heavily on the panes, he returned to his latest diversion of making patterns with his nose. He didn't credit Dillon's tale that the improper use of this member would turn it into india-rubber if the wind changed suddenly.

Anyhow, supposing it did? Anthony thought it would be fun. To pull it out and let it go with a snap like the twisty rings that Big Man gave him off his papers.

Anthony yawned. Of all long days, this day was the longest. His walk had been cut short by a driving hail-storm. Why didn't Big Man come home and tell him stories in the firelight? Dillon had tried to fill the gap in his current literature with legends of the "little people," but fairies weren't a patch on pirates! Anthony fretted against the prevailing feminine atmosphere. Mother was out. She always seemed to be out now, round at the Ferry House. He was secretly jealous of Roger-Lee, who according to Dillon had better manners than a "certain little gentleman"! Tea had made a slight diversion. They had roasted an apple on a string that turned in front of the nursery fire. But it hadn't tasted very good, and the brown sugar had been missing. It was "shorter" than ever since the Peace, Dillon, grumbling, had explained. Anthony privately decided that Peace was a huge mistake. He had lost his chance of being a soldier and every one seemed dissatisfied. There was Johnson always "cwoss" because somebody kept her Fred somewhere where he



wasn't wanted. No boys marched down the lane to drill in front of the old boat-house; a blight had descended on Liddingcombe. The sooner they had another war the better, was Anthony's conclusion. Even the flags had lost their glamour and the snow had been disappointing. It was never like the Christmas cards.

Dillon was busy ironing. Anthony drifted across to her. He knew it was no good asking again when Big Man was coming home. He stood on one leg balancing himself against the edge of the table, watching the steam rise up from the damp handkerchiefs. He liked the little hiss of the iron and the thrill when Dillon first tested its heat close to her wrinkled cheek. A hair-breadth nearer and she would be burnt! He didn't exactly *wish* for it, but the danger was exciting.

Dillon got up for a fresh iron and placed it upright to cool on its stand; Anthony sidled around the table, watching the nurse from under his lashes, and furtively spat on the heated surface. What a hiss! The next moment Dillon bore down on him, voluble and indignant. The awful threat of approaching bedtime sobered the culprit who pleaded for mercy. Then a familiar step sounded on the passage outside and Sabine came in. Anthony ran to her.

"Muvver, muvver!"

She caught him up, her tired face alight with love.

"Well, have you been a good boy?"

That tedious question! Anthony wriggled. Would Dilly "tell" about the iron? He was thankful when his mother turned to the old nurse, ignoring an answer, to impart her information. The Taverners were coming in for some music after supper.

Dillon approved. Since Mark's departure the piano had remained closed. Sabine avoided the rooms below and would sit, a book unread on her knee, brooding before her own fire after the day's work was over.

"You'll be wearin' your velvet tea-gown, then?" Dillon studied her mistress' face, "I'll put it out, m'm. You'll find it chilly with no fire for the past week. Did you tell that Mary to light it?"

"No, but I will." Her voice was listless. What did anything



matter now? There were heavy shadows under her eyes, testifying to sleepless nights. "Old Humporley's dead," she said abruptly. Dillon nodded and crossed herself with a murmured prayer for his soul. "He was asking for Mark all the morning, but what could I do?" She flung out her hands. "And I met Sir James in the village. It gets more difficult every day. I've given out that he's in London. If *only* I had his address!"

"He'll be back soon," said Dillon gravely.

"Why do you think so?" asked Sabine. She had forgotten Anthony who was listening, wide-eyed.

"It was in me tay-cup to-night, m'm. A tall gintleman under the Crown. With a bird too, for hasting news, and tears. What else but tears of joy?" She folded the last handkerchief, pressed it, and laid it on the pile. "It's Himself, for sure, and the end of trouble." Her crooning old voice became triumphant. "Jist look at the opening in the fire — all clear an' bright, Miss Sabine, dear. That should tell you without spache." She watched the wave of superstition catch her mistress and smiled, contented. "It's time for Master Anthony to have his bath," she added briskly. "I must be gitting the warm water."

The little boy began to protest. He clung to his mother's skirt, begging for another minute. Just *one*? For a ride on Dobbin?

Indulgently she lifted him up on to the horse that had been Mark's joy. Anthony, grasping its scanty mane, and kicking the dappled sides, took his evening exercise. As she rocked the steed, one arm about him, he peered up into Sabine's face.

"Muvver?"

"Well?"

"Dilly says Big Man will tum home soon. What's *soon*?"

Her heart contracted.

"I don't know, darling. I wish I did."

"Before Kissmas?"

Sabine nodded. Anthony sighed with satisfaction.

"Den I'll be a dood boy." He allowed himself to be lifted down. "Woger-Lee's dot no gee-gee." His voice was muffled as



Dillon drew his tunic over his dark head. "But he's dot a fort with *heaps* of soldiers and Big Man's pwomised to div' me some — for Kissmas — an' a *weal* cannon, an' tents with a little flag on the top. Den we'll play at bluggy battles!"

"*Anthony!*" Sabine glanced at Dillon, pouring water into the bath. "Wherever did he learn that word?" She tried in vain to look severe.

Anthony answered for himself.

"Steve says it. 'Dis *bluggy* war'!" He skipped with excitement and kicked off his shoes. Erect in his socks, sturdy, triumphant, he shouted his new, forbidden expression.

"You leave him to me, m'm," said Dillon grimly.

She advanced, but Anthony held his ground. The pluck of the small, defiant figure roused in his mother a sudden pride.

"*Don't* scold him!" She whispered the words into the old nurse's ear.

"Dade and you'll spoil him, Miss Sabine, dear. He knows better — I've told him afore. An' I've given Steve a piece of me mind."

Anthony looked from one to the other slyly. Then he giggled.

"Woger-Lee *daren't* say '*bluggy*'!"

Sabine, wisely, beat a retreat.

. . . . .  
By ten o'clock it was snowing hard, the flakes that had puzzled Anthony now forming a blanket on the ground. It muffled the sound of approaching wheels, but Dillon, peering out at the night bathed in a frosty moonlight, saw the gate in the wall swing back and caught her breath in sudden excitement.

"*Himself!*" The word slipped from her lips; her worn hands were clasped together.

She watched Mark's slow progress to the porch, the cabman in his wake, carrying his rug and suit-case; then, with a glance at Anthony sleeping in the room beyond, she tiptoed to the head of the stairs.

From below came a wave of music: Sabine's rich and haunting voice in a duet with the violin, for Elizma was playing an obbli-



gato. It rose and fell and, in the hush, Dillon could catch a sound of footsteps and the twitter of Johnson's explanations.

Dillon's mind moved swiftly, divided between fear and hope. It was enough to annoy a saint that he should come this very night when her darling had company! It was not. The Taverners' genial presence might break the awkwardness of the meeting and give Sabine a moment's grace. That Johnson now, "blathering" there! Why couldn't she leave the man alone? With the mistress waiting, all unconscious of the happiness at hand. Her prophecy was bearing fruit; the "tay-leaves" had not lied.

Dillon retreated quickly. Johnson was coming up the stairs and, below, the drawing-room door had opened.

Opened to a crescendo passage where violin and voice were blent, covering every minor sound. Only Taverner, by the fireside, was aware of the tall figure, propped on his crutches in the doorway, grave-eyed, listening, a deep furrow between his brows. He was on the point of rising when Mark, with a sign, checked him. It was evident that his host was waiting for the music to come to an end.

Taverner, interested, aware of a dramatic moment, silently studied Mark, noting his fine proportions, with a mixture of admiration and pity. Here was no cripple resigned to his fate; no weakling to be ruled by a woman. Despite his awkward attitude, the shoulders heightened by his crutches, he yet preserved his dignity. His mouth was set in a hard line; his blue eyes were cold and searching. They met Taverner's steadily and quickened, obeying some hidden thought. A silent current of sympathy passed like a flash between the pair, the appeal and response of a common sex, which is more marked in the masculine one. Neither of them desired a scene. But Mark nourished a deep resentment. This was the way that the woman he loved could amuse herself in his absence, knowing that she had driven him forth to his lonely Gethsemane. She could live in the present, forgetting the past — a "light woman"! His lips tightened.

The Taverners he could not blame, though their presence at



Liddingcombe surprised him. They had a claim on his courtesy, through their kindly offer concerning the wedding. He wondered how much they knew? In any case he would show them who was rightful master here. They were his guests, not Sabine's.

As the music ceased he came forward and was met half-way by Taverner. He caught a startled gasp from Sabine and a murmur between the women. Then Elizma joined her husband, the violin tucked under her arm.

Taverner introduced her:

"This is my wife. I'm afraid we've been trespassing during your absence. You must forgive us."

"Not at all. I'm delighted to meet you." Mark shook hands with the graceful woman and, divining her embarrassment, added in a warmer voice, "How well you play! Is this 'Pietro'?"

"Yes." She gathered her wits together. "So you've heard of him?"

"Naturally." He smiled down into her face, and was conscious, beneath her light manner, of a hint of aggression.

"It's so delightful," she said smoothly, "to have Sabine to accompany me—to say nothing of her singing!" She glanced back over her shoulder at the silent figure by the piano, deliberately including her.

Mark, for the first time, looked across the narrow space.

"Oh—how are you?" Still on his crutches, he made no movement in her direction. His eyes, cool and indifferent, passed over her pale face.

She ignored the polite question.

"How did you come? We didn't hear you." Her voice shook. With an effort, she steadied herself and joined the group.

"I wired for a cab at the junction." He turned to Elizma, "Won't you sit down?" and set the example himself, glad to be relieved of his crutches. "It's cold to-night. I think we're in for an unusually heavy fall. There was snow all along the line to Exeter, then it seemed to have thawed, but it caught me up on the moor. When did you come down from town?"

"Three days ago. We were going for Christmas to Cornwall"—



Elizma, facing him on the sofa beside Sabine, bravely upheld the conversation — “but our plans were changed at the last moment by an outbreak of influenza. Fortunately we managed to get the Ferry House for a week or two. We had it, you know, in the summer.”

“So I heard.”

There followed a pause. Taverner frowned at his wife but she disregarded his mute hint. Although she was longing to depart, her thoughts were centred round Sabine. She wanted to give the latter time to prepare herself for the coming ordeal. Mark’s attitude troubled her. He was very much the Lord of the Manor to-night, and he looked merciless.

He broke the silence that weighed on the group:

“You mustn’t let me disturb your music. I’m so fond of the violin. Won’t you play something more?”

He had expected a refusal, but Elizma rose without hesitation.

“With pleasure. What do you like?” She had her reward in the instant relief visible on Sabine’s face as she moved across to the piano. “Do you care for a Grieg Sonata — or is he too serious?”

“No. He suits a snowy night.”

She glanced up with the swift smile that made her beautiful for a moment; the smile that had won Taverner’s heart. It startled Mark. He had not admired her, aware of her slightly eccentric dress and the cropped hair which he disliked, but now he realized her charm. She answered him in her husky voice:

“That’s true. Even in moments of passion his music comes over the frozen fiords.” Tucking the violin under her chin, she tuned it softly, then glanced at Sabine. “Ready?”

Her friend’s mournful eyes were the last touch needed to string her up to the full power of her art. Her whole soul went into the notes.

Mark leaned back in his arm-chair, his face a polite mask. But gradually as the fluid magic fired his blood he bent forward and the lines round his mouth deepened. In his eyes grew a hunger of love and despair. Taverner averted his own.



"Poor devil!" he said to himself. "He's hard hit. And he's up against centuries of prejudice. Crippled, too, in body and mind." His thoughts turned off to the medical side of the case and his eyes stole back again to the impassive figure; the steady hands on the arms of the chair, the perfect physical control. "I don't believe he's ever had shell shock. It's a convenient argument to explain the lapse of memory. If one could repair that, what a blessing it would be, both for him and for Sabine — a clean cut to all this folly. I've a great mind —" He left the thought unfinished but drew his chair a shade nearer to the fender. As the last arpeggio rippled softly he stretched out his foot as though to warm it at the fire. The action dislodged the poker that fell from the high support with a sharp and deafening clatter.

Elizma, dreaming over her fiddle, started, annoyed. From Sabine came a quick 'Oh!', for her nerves were strained. Mark was the only one unmoved.

"I'm sorry," said Taverner.

"You Goth!" Elizma mustered a smile. Orde was so rarely clumsy. "You ruined my last note!"

"I know." He tried to look guilty, but inwardly he was triumphant. He had settled one point in his mind.

Mark, with an effort, roused himself.

"The remedy seems obvious. Won't you give us a further treat?"

"It's time we were getting home." She laid her violin in its case. "We have a snowy walk before us."

"Well, it's been a great pleasure," said Mark. "I hope you'll both dine with me one night before long?" He reached for his crutches and stood up. "You must have something before you go — a glass of wine to keep you warm? In any case your husband will."

Elizma declined, but Taverner, to his wife's surprise, accepted the hospitality.

"It's a temptation — after hours!" He followed his host from the room.

As the door closed, Sabine turned to her friend.



"You see how he looks? I *dread* it, Elizma."

"Why?" The other smiled tenderly. "If only you had watched his face when I was playing — he's broken-hearted. You can put it right with one word. Tell him simply — without delay. He's devoted to you. Don't you love him?"

"Yes. But I feel so tired. I'm not in the right mood to-night. If only —" She bit her lip.

"Only we hadn't been here? I agree. Still —"

Sabine, wide-eyed, checked her.

"My dear! I was *thankful* that you were. It's not that. It's just that my courage is at its lowest ebb."

"Then it's on the turn of the tide," said Elizma. "If you ask me what I think, you're exaggerating the situation." Her arm went round Sabine's shoulder as she sat, bowed, before the piano. "He's come back. Doesn't that prove that he's giving you another chance? Take it and thank God. You can put him out of his misery."

Steps sounded in the hall and a fragment of conversation, with Taverner's deep and resonant voice:

"I've known cases of it before. It comes quite suddenly, you say, an overpowering smell of apples?"

"Yes." Mark laughed shortly. "I'm thinking of offering it to the Psychical Research people as a genuine form of haunting and ask if they can lay the ghost. I suppose it's really a nervous symptom, some weird after-effect of shell shock."

"Possibly."

Elizma smiled. She knew that the word in her husband's mouth generally covered supreme doubt of another man's diagnosis. She tightened her hold on Sabine's arm, as they stood, side by side.

"Come and see us off. Yes, you *must*. My coat's outside, isn't it? But first, kiss me?" She lifted her face. Sabine stooped gratefully. "There! Now, are you going to be good, or behave like a silly schoolgirl?" Her golden eyes were full of light.

She watched Sabine's head go up with the old instinctive hint



of pride and rejoiced in her heart. Her task was done, save for a lingering feminine touch.

"You're looking what Dilly calls 'a picture' — if that's any consolation."

Sabine smiled.

"Not much."

"It all helps," said Elizma wisely.



## CHAPTER XXVII

ON the Taverners' departure Sabine and Mark instinctively turned back into the drawing-room. They could hear Johnson bolting the door, then the click of the glasses as she cleared away in the dining-room. For the silence of the old house was magnified by the snow without.

Mark looked inexpressibly weary. He had been through a painful time in London, not only a prey to mental disturbance but harassed by physical discomfort. Arriving after his hurried flight at an early hour, he had shared the experience of many travellers at that period. There was no room vacant at his club and he drove in despair from hotel to hotel seeking accommodation. At last he had been deposited by his taxi-driver at a well-known restaurant during the luncheon hour, that worthy refusing to take him further. The garish scene had seemed to Mark like some evil dream of luxury, with its noisy overdressed women, its gay youth in khaki that, in turn, shouldered him aside without the slightest apology, and its independent and churlish officials.

His soul craved for solitude. Yet there he sat, with the din of the band piercing his throbbing head, in a London changed and utterly hostile, intoxicated by sudden "Peace," with no thought beyond pleasure.

In the streets it was the same. Never before had he felt his infirmity so acutely. He realized to the full how little a crippled man in mufti could expect in the shape of kindness. Jostled by the never-ending stream of people making their way to theatre and music-hall, he found at last a bare bedroom in a shabby hotel off the Strand.

He had lived in it for a fortnight; without a fire, unpleasantly



conscious of its damp airlessness, subsisting on poor food at famine prices, roughly served, yet too spent to adventure further. Here, at least, he was safely hidden, master of his own thoughts.

He would swing himself down on his crutches painfully to the Embankment and, leaning on the parapet, watch the river carry past its flotsam of humanity through the grey murk of the winter days. But the spectacle was less drab than his personal speculations. It held the merit of law and order and it moved to an appointed purpose. In the shipwreck of his own life Mark could discern no guiding star. The port of the future was closed to him. Body and soul revolted against companionship with a woman, once dearly loved and respected, who could, so cruelly, deceive him. Gradually the deceit grew to hold the paramount importance, surpassing his first horror over Sabine's lapse of virtue. How could he ever trust her again? All his old morbid doubt regarding his own mental condition returned with redoubled force. To be at the mercy of a woman who could take advantage of his weakness? At times it seemed that not only the past but the present was becoming blurred. There were intervals in which he sank into a state of apathy that nearly approached unconsciousness. Then, with a start, he would awake and wrestle once more with the problem.

Inch by inch he went over the ground, recalling her silences and evasions. He had put them down jealously to her feeling for the dead soldier, and natural reluctance to stir from their grave sad and happy memories. She had never spoken directly of Cruikshank. Now this seemed to the nerve-strained man a fresh evidence of her guilt.

If only he did not love her! For love persisted, against his will, with a new and degraded form of passion. It offended his cleaner instincts, but in the long hours of the night he would feel the primitive desire forcibly to possess this woman who had fore-sworn her claim to his scrupulous self-control. Then, with the wan light of dawn, as he tossed on his narrow bed, the fever would pass with the longing to humble her to his bodily needs. He would draw up the fog-stained blind and look across the vista of



roofs, away from the grime to where a streak of primrose stole across the sky; and as if his own mental clouds lifted in sympathy he would find himself searching for some excuse, mad and improbable, to build up his broken idol.

He indulged in wild conjectures. Was it possible that Cruikshank had taken a sudden base advantage of an unprotected woman? Such things had been known in the war. For his heart warred with his reason; he was haunted by Sabine's charm, her serene yet youthful dignity and her motherly care of the child. There must be some saving clause, overlooked in the moment of shock. She would explain. She could explain. He nerved himself to return.

As the train carried him away from the pall of smoke, London's breath, and he saw again the open fields, the clean river and widening sky, he felt like an escaped prisoner. When they reached the edge of the Wiltshire downs, where the snow lay in pristine patches, the fresh sweet air blew into his face and revived his courage. He could picture Sabine vividly in the haven of his boyhood, waiting and fearing, in loneliness, broken-hearted as himself.

The journey seemed endless. He had to wait at Exeter for the slower train to the junction and he forced himself to take some food. He watched disdainfully the noisy by-play between some men and a coquettish, elderly barmaid. Everywhere reigned the same spirit, he decided morosely; a feverish pursuit of pleasure, wanton in its abandonment, the war forgotten and with it the host of dead beneath their rotting crosses.

The snow had changed to driving sleet; the damp cold bit into his bones as he entered an unheated carriage. But afar he saw the low grey house with the gentle and aloof air it had caught from the Vallances, its wide hearths and burning logs. By one of these sat a lonely figure, with her saddened beauty, listening for a step out of the dark, the slow tap of his crutches.

The disillusion had been complete.

Sabine could amuse herself, find consolation with her friends. It was a blow to his vanity. In his tired mood it emphasized the



gulf between their characters. Now, as he sat stiffly on the cane sofa that had once supported the paralysed woman, facing Sabine across the hearth, some portion of the unbending spirit of Miss Vallance took possession of him.

Through the silence came the sound of Johnson; not in the best of tempers, retiring with the last tray; then the distant slam of a door. As if he had waited for this signal, Mark looked up and spoke abruptly.

"You didn't expect me to-night?"

"No. Why should I? You never wrote." Sabine's voice was clear and calm. It had only needed the sharp tonic of Elizma's counsel to cause the reaction to set in from her stunned despair. A sense of danger stirred her blood, bringing the colour to her cheeks. She cleared the first obstacle. "If I had known, I should naturally have prevented the Taverners from coming."

Mark stared into the fire.

"You understood why I went away?"

"No." It was said with dignity.

The unexpected response brought his eyes to her face in quick resentment. They were vividly blue with a flame of anger.

"I gave you credit for understanding." He mastered his voice with an effort. "I had to be alone for a time to think over — all you told me."

"There was no need." She smiled gravely. "Had you waited and given me a chance of explaining we should both have been spared much suffering, Mark. You only heard a part of the truth."

He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"I might have guessed it! It seems to me that women fail to understand a man's meaning of the word." His face became cynical. "I've been married and I ought to know. But I placed you on a different footing." He saw her wince and it stirred in him the primitive cruelty that lies at the root of all human passion. "I believed in you — till you told me your story."

She leaned forward, her own mood changing, subtly affected by his, and gave him back scorn for scorn.



"So, without allowing me a chance of defending myself, you went and judged me. Do you call that fair?"

He hesitated.

"Was there any need of an explanation? The facts in themselves seemed sufficient." He was conscious, even as he spoke, that the answer was grotesque. He had returned for this very chance.

"Perhaps, for a magistrate, but not for a man who loved me." She was watching him sombrely, wondering, with a touch of panic, if love were dead; if this hard-mouthed man would be moved by anything but the wound to his self-esteem when he learnt the full romance. She saw a sudden slight contraction of the muscles controlling his lips and went on impulsively, "You placed me on the same footing as the woman you turned out of the village."

The protest failed. It reminded Mark of Sabine's sympathy for the victim.

"Well?" He looked her straight in the face.

She sprang to her feet at the insult. They had reached the climax without preparation. She turned his weapon on himself.

"Supposing that you had been the man — the father of her child — what then?"

Mark's nostrils curled.

"Is it likely?"

"No." She drew a deep breath. "But *you* were — the father of mine."

Head flung back, superbly defiant, she stood before him, her boats burnt. Time seemed to pause in its stride, the silence a weight unbearable. Now, *now* — she clenched her hands.

But instead of all she had expected she saw horror and amazement pass over Mark's features, to be replaced by a growing doubt.

"You forget Cruikshank — apparently."

"He never existed!" Her voice rang. "Not even in name. I invented it and my marriage to screen myself — and *you*!"

His hand went up and pressed his forehead. He looked physically sick.

"Wait! You say that it was a lie — all that part about Cruik-



shank, though you made me believe it for weeks on end. Why should this be the truth?" His self-control suddenly snapped. "Good God, it's impossible! That I, married at the time, would consent to such trickery. To bolster up a guilty intrigue with you under my aunt's roof. And carry it on for four years? No! I think you must be mad."

"I'm sane. It's you — who have *forgotten!*"

The passionate cry was wrung from her. Even Mark in his rebellion was caught by its compelling note. His face worked, watching hers.

"Sabine, for God's sake, let's have the truth and nothing else! You say I loved you, years ago, when my aunt was alive. Did she guess?"

"No." She choked over the word.

"And that I persuaded you — took advantage of your position —" He stammered and tried again. "That Anthony — How *could* it have happened?"

"Because I couldn't bear to lose you and our single chance of happiness. You were going to the war, to risk your life and it seemed — it seemed —" In vain she sought for an explanation that should be true and yet exculpate herself. "You agreed. We were desperately in love."

"*Agreed?*" He had found the weak spot in her armour. "Agreed to what?"

"To go away for a month together." Her hope, that had risen prematurely with the gentler inflexion in his voice, sank again. "So, we went."

"Where?" Through narrowed lids he watched her. Here was a point that could be proved.

But the question, that seemed a side issue, unsettled her thoughts. The name of the place, so dear and familiar, suddenly vanished as names will from the memory under nervous strain. Baffled, she sought to recall it, a frightened smile unconsciously playing round her parched lips.

"It was — How absurd! In the Isle of Wight."

"*Where?*" Inexorably he held her to the statement.



She threw up her hands with a desperate gesture.

"It's slipped from my mind. What does it matter?"

In silence he waited. He told himself that he had caught her out at last. His condemnation was complete. An adventuress — he writhed at the thought — who had sought to saddle the child upon him through the medium of the "lost years."

"We'll leave it at the Isle of Wight." He spoke dryly and bitterly. "Will you tell me why you've kept all this a profound secret from first to last throughout our engagement?"

She was nervously twisting the platinum chain between her fingers, her thoughts in a whirl. She answered him in a whisper:

"I wanted — to start afresh." It sounded weak in her own ears. To Mark it seemed very likely, but he misconstrued the hidden motive.

"I see. Then you would have married me, leaving me in ignorance? Allowing me to *adopt* the child that you say is my own?"

"No!" She flinched. "I was going to tell you that day at the boat-house. But you went off and I felt outraged. To have suffered all that I did for you — it was terrible when you returned and held no memory of me — it broke my heart. I couldn't bear it! And then" — her eyes filled with tears — "for you, above all men, to *judge* me!"

Again there was a ring of truth in the broken voice, but it came too late. A consummate actress, he decided. Ruth's speech flashed up in his mind, with its insidious suggestion: "Perhaps she has been on the stage?"

Had the vision of childhood seen deeper than that obscured by mature passion? The young girl's naïve infatuation he had flung aside for the sake of a woman whom he had placed miles above her — the mother of Anthony.

His glance swept over Sabine; the costly velvet of her dress, the old lace that enhanced it and the beautiful ring on her finger. Who had paid for these luxuries? *Since there had been no Cruikshank.* He was hardly aware of his silence, immersed in his painful thoughts.



"Mark?"

He looked up, startled. Their eyes met. In his she read a merciless disbelief.

"You think I'm lying?" With a jerk she drew out from its hiding-place the Vallance heirloom and held it up. "Look at this!" The great ruby caught the blaze of the fire. It lay upon her open palm like a liquid drop of blood. "You gave me this" — she stooped to him — "on the first night we were together. You said it was a proof of your love — that you looked on me as your *wife*."

Dazed, Mark stared at it. Before he could find any rejoinder she had slipped the chain over her head and let it fall across his knees. There followed a strained silence.

By some wave of telepathy she guessed the path his mind was taking. Left in charge of his property with no limit to her powers, the keys of the safe in her keeping, it would have been simple to annex it.

A thief? Her pride rose in revolt. She had borne much. This was the end. She drew herself up to her full height and loosened the reins of her anger.

"Take it back! I've done with you. You don't belong to my world — a world outside this petty village with its hypocrisy and its cant! You're the last of a dying generation who ruled by the power of their name alone, without justice or simple mercy. I'd be *ashamed* to be your wife!" Her voice sank lower but still vibrated with passionate rebellion and scorn. "I've loved you, Mark, with all my heart. I gave you my body and bore you a son. But he'll be better without a father — he'll grow up a finer man. I shall teach him to look to the people for justice, and not to the squires of Liddingcombe. When he learns the facts, how you treated his mother, he, in turn, shall judge *you*."

She paused on the word, her eyes ablaze, a spot of colour on either cheek. She looked like some avenging spirit upborne on a wave of tragedy. Then, without waiting for Mark to recover from the shock of her ruthless condemnation, she turned and made her way to the door.



On the threshold she wheeled round. Mark's eyes had followed her. Tortured by conflicting thoughts, he tried to speak but the words would not come.

She held up her hand imperiously, disregarding the prayer on his face.

"I will leave you the supreme proof — the letters you have written me. Your love of truth will be satisfied." With this, she passed out.

In the dim hall she paused, trembling, her hands pressed to her bosom, struggling for self-control and aware of a triumph that tasted of death.

She had lost Mark and her faith in mankind. There remained — what?

Anthony? A perpetual reminder of his father. There was no love in her heart as she mounted the steep old stairs and entered the nursery.

Dillon rose from before the fire, gave her mistress one glance and wrung her hands.

"Pack, Dillon! Everything." Sabine's voice was as hard as her face. "We're off by the first train to-morrow."

Dillon moaned. She tried to put in a feeble protest but her mistress was adamant.

"There's no time for talk now. I must leave everything in order. You can come to me when you've finished."

From the room beyond rose a child's cry:

"Muvver, muvver!"

Sabine turned instinctively; then her body stiffened. Mark's son. She went out, ignoring him.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

DILLON rocked herself by the fire, her apron thrown over her head in an abandonment of grief. But slowly she became aware of another voice that was joining in with a shrill refrain cut by sobs:

"Dilly, Dilly! *Tum* to me!"

Conscience-stricken, she rose to her feet.

"Coming, my lamb. Here's old Dilly!" A sharp stab of rheumatism caught her as she hurried across and her hand went to her back.

Yes, she was getting old indeed and who would be left to look after the child so heedlessly brought into the world? Unconsciously she had transferred a large share of the devotion lavished on Sabine in the past to the younger generation. Now, her heart was sore with rebellion. Sabine's sharp command and disdain for a word of explanation to the confidante of long years had been hard enough to bear without that last grim offence: to turn her back on her innocent child. Anger dried the old woman's tears.

She carried the lamp to the inner room. Anthony was sitting up in his cot, eyes wide with fear. The light fell on his wet cheeks, still rosy from deep slumber out of which he had been disturbed by his mother's stormy passage. His instinct told him that something was wrong, and the darkness intensified his terror, together with the indifference displayed to his reiterated needs. Now he refused to be comforted.

"Muvver, muvver! Want *muvver*!" He wailed it into Dillon's bosom, struggling away from her embrace. The sight of her own tear-stained face only increased his sense of panic. He was working himself into a fever and Dillon wisely changed her tactics.



She released him and stood erect.

"Now, Master Anthony! If you'll be good I'll tell you a sacret. Your mother's too busy to come just yet, for we're off in the puff-puff to-morrow."

Anthony's knuckles came down from his eyes. He caught his breath with a last, sharp sob. Here was news! It penetrated his cloud of woe and conjured up a way to get equal with Roger-Lee — that experienced traveller! He gulped hard and found his voice, still mistrustful but interested:

"A *weal* puff-puff?"

Dillon nodded.

"And a rale train for miles and miles. But only if ye sleep first."

"Oo!" Anthony's smile stole out like April sunshine after a shower. He considered the bribe with a snuffle. Dillon proceeded to wipe his nose.

"Blow!" she commanded.

Anthony "blew" — a performance he detested, but his mind was filled with graver matters. There was Big Man, for instance. Would he be there at the end of the journey? He consulted Dillon on this point.

The old woman gave a start, for a sudden luminous idea had flashed across her. Anthony, with his ruffled curls and the eager light in his tear-stained, cherub's face, seemed to her irresistible. Who could hold out against such love? Not Mark, who had already shown to the keen-eyed old woman by many little words and deeds his tenderness towards his son. If only she knew what had happened in that fateful interview? But, since Sabine guarded the secret, Dillon must act in the dark and be led by her own wisdom. She glanced at the clock, her plans shaping, then back again at her charge.

"'Tis longin' to see him that you are?" There was no need for any response; it was written on his face. "Then ye shall — this blessèd night."

Anthony quivered with excitement.

"He's *tum*?"



Dillon nodded, smiling.

"An' if ye'll promise to behave — jist kiss the master and wish him good-night — 'tis meself will be takin' ye down for a minute."

Anthony scrambled up.

"Now?" His voice was shrill with delight.

Dillon's answer was to strip a blanket from the cot and wrap it round the little figure. She gathered him up in her arms.

"Hush then, or ye'll spoil the surprise."

Nervously, she opened the door and peered down the dim passage. There was no sign of Sabine and she moved on with her precious burden. When she came to the bend in the stairs she drew a breath of relief, for the lamp was still burning in the hall. It testified to Mark's vigil.

The drawing-room door stood ajar. Dillon tapped, her heart in her mouth. No one answered. She mustered her courage and advanced, the glib excuse on her lips: Master Anthony would not sleep until he had seen Mr. Vallance, who would forgive the liberty as the child was "fretting himself sick."

At first she thought the room was empty. She stood blinking on the threshold, Anthony wriggling in her arms, anxious to be put down. Then, as her eyes pierced the shadows beyond the radius of the lamp, she gave an exclamation of horror. Mark lay crumpled up on the floor, motionless, one arm extended with, beyond it, a fallen crutch. His face was hidden. She could see only the stiffness of his body in an attitude suggesting death. The blood ebbed from her heart and her limbs felt paralysed.

She was roused by a whimper from her charge, and the consciousness of a nearer danger. Already frightened once to-night the little fellow must not guess at the tragedy before him. The habit of long years rose to her aid.

"He's sleeping," she whispered through parched lips and tiptoed back into the hall. "It would niver do for us to wake him. Hush then!" as Anthony began to protest vehemently. "Didn't you promise me to be good? With Himself worn out by his long journey. To-morrow you shall see him, dearie, an' Dilly shall tell him how well ye've behaved." She swept him on up the stair-



case. "There'll be all them grand soldiers to play with and the little tents." Her breath gave out. Thankfully she clutched at the knob of the nursery door, passed through and laid him in his still warm bed. "Now, could you be a soldier yourself and brave enough to lie there alone whilst Dilly gits the poor gintleman a pillow to lay beneath his head? She'll be back before ye begin to miss her and give you the lamp for company." Anthony, still aggrieved but put on his mettle, considered the test.

"Dilly will hear you if ye call. But you will not; and 'tis proud Himself will feel of you when I tells him by and by." She tucked the clothes firmly round him. "Just think of the puff-puff to-morrow."

With an anxious glance she departed, torn between her love for the child and the need for immediate action. Sabine must know. Her lips tightened as she tapped at her mistress' door. A clear voice answered her summons.

"Come in!" Sabine was seated before her writing-table, with sheaves of bills and household books piled at her elbow, making up the last accounts. "Well?" Her manner was impatient.

"'Tis not well," said Dillon grimly, "with Himself as good as dead below, God rest his soul!" She crossed herself. "Will you come, plaize, an' look at him? And remimber the child of ye both that's been sobbin' his heart out, the cratur', for a mother that turned her back on him." She paused. Sabine had sprung to her feet.

"What do you mean? Is Mark *ill*?" There was panic on her face, but Dillon, for once, was ruthless.

"Ye'd best see with your own eyes the end of this day's bad business." She backed as she spoke, a finger pressed to her lips, with a jerk of her head towards the distant nursery.

Sabine, her heart thudding, followed. At the head of the stairs, Dillon stopped.

"I'll be going to Master Anthony." She whispered the words, her eyes on her mistress. "You'll be better without the owld nurse that's only useful for the packing!" She turned, but Sabine caught her arm.



"*Dilly?*" There was a world of despair in her dark eyes.

Her clutch tightened, she gave the arm the little shake that in childhood days had marked the collapse of her quick tempers. It awoke long-dead memories in the faithful old servant's breast and broke up her frozen calm.

"You're *wanting* me?" Her lips quivered.

Sabine, speechless, nodded her head. In silence they went downstairs.

. . . . .

Elizma was sipping a cup of hot milk in front of the dining-room fire and spinning out the performance, for she wished to talk to her husband, when a bell rang through the silent house, startling them both.

"What can it be? At this hour of night!" She looked up anxiously at Orde who was leaning against the mantelpiece.

"A mistake, I expect." Taverner frowned. He had been trying to get his wife off to bed. The walk had been tiring and she was in an excited mood, stirred by the events of the evening.

They heard Pluffles go to the door and then a woman's anxious voice.

"Stay there! You're not to go out in the draught." Taverner strode to the door, vexed at the interruption.

Sabine stood in the hall, white-faced and powdered with snow. She gave a gasp of relief when she saw him.

"You're still up? Thank God! Mark's so ill — he must have fallen — we found him unconscious on the floor." She poured it out breathlessly. "I didn't know what to do and I thought — I thought —" She began to stammer, suddenly conscious that she was asking an unwarrantable favour from a man so famous in his profession.

"You'd like me to come back with you?" Taverner was seized with pity at the sight of her haggard face.

"If you *will*? I can't wake him and —"

Elizma interrupted her, disobedient to Orde's commands, standing behind them in the doorway.



"Of course. Come in, you poor dear! I've been thinking of you all the evening."

Sabine gave a gasp of relief. She stumbled forward to be caught in Elizma's tender arms.

"I mustn't stay — not a minute. But Dr. Stonar is out of reach — it's so far to Lidding St. Mary. Your husband's so good, but I feel I'm taking advantage. In this weather —"

"Nonsense!" Taverner broke in. "I'll come, with pleasure, and do what I can. Just wait in there while I get my coat."

Elizma drew Sabine towards the fire. He could hear them whispering together. He knew that his wife would not rest until she had gleaned further details. He could learn them himself as they went along. He called Pluffles on one side.

"Get Mrs. Taverner to bed, if you can, and leave the door unbolted. No one need sit up. I may be kept some time."

"H'yes sir." The man looked indignant, foreseeing another snowy walk for his master. On his holiday too! It wasn't fair, when he worked so hard.

Taverner re-entered the room.

"I'm ready, if you are." He smiled at Sabine, and bent down to kiss his wife. "You'll turn in directly I've gone?"

"I will." Her golden eyes sought his. "Don't hurry back. I shall understand." Lowering her voice, she whispered softly, "Be good to Sabine — there's terrible trouble."

He nodded gravely.

"You're not to worry."

She frowned and spoke audibly:

"There's no need. I expect it's only a fainting attack. Mr. Vallance looked dreadfully tired and of course he's not strong yet. But anyone can see he's healthy."

Her optimism cheered Sabine. Elizma watched her cross the hall with a firmer step and pass out by Taverner's side into the blinding flurry of snow that flung stray flakes through the open door.

Pluffles closed it hurriedly, then moved aside, his stout body barring the entrance to the room with its dying fire, his eyes



fixed on his mistress who stood, pensive, at the foot of the stairs.

She glanced at him absently; then a faint smile curved her lips.

"I haven't finished my milk yet."

"No, madam?" He looked surprised. "Then it must be cold. I'll heat it h'up and bring it to your bedroom door."

"Which means that I'm to go to bed?" She laughed outright.

Pluffles coughed behind his hand in an apologetic manner.

"H'of course, madam, that's h'as you like. But Brigitta has lit your fire upstairs and the coal is getting a trifle diminished. Mr. Taverner h'impressed on me the need for h'economy."

"Quite right — I'll take your advice! Never mind about the milk. Good night, Pluffles."

"Thank you, madam. Good night, madam." He watched her pass up the narrow staircase with a step that had grown less light of late, proud in having fulfilled his mission. There was reverence on his face. He had lived with Taverner "from boy to man," as he expressed it, and he was one of the family in a sense that the modern retainer with his short service rarely attains to. Every year his master put by a sum entered in Pluffles' name to safeguard him in old age from the chance of penury. Meanwhile he held a position of authority in the house. His word was law below stairs, and his intimate pride was a faint resemblance to the man he adored, augmented by the gift of clothes which Taverner handed over to him long before they showed signs of wear. In these, on his holidays, he would attend race-meetings, his favourite form of sport. Elizma, as a young bride, had won the faithful servant's heart by appealing to him for advice in her choice of a "winner." Pluffles had placed many a pound with his sporting friends on her behalf and once — an unforgettable moment — he had driven down to Epsom with her on a coach as the "guest" of her brother-in-law, where he played nurse to the children.

"Bless her," he said inaudibly as he turned out the dining-room lamp. "I hopes that h'it will be a girl. The master would like it — a pigeon pair."

Meanwhile Sabine and Taverner were making their way, arm-



in-arm, under his big umbrella down the deserted village street. The snow and the darkness impeded their movements and the conversation was disjointed, but as they passed Pratt's shuttered shop Taverner risked a hurried question:

"You don't happen to know if Vallance had any minor wounds beside the damage done to his ankle?"

"Yes. A small piece of shrapnel that they took out of his left shoulder. But that healed long ago." She slipped and tightened her clasp on his arm.

"Hold up!" said Taverner cheerfully. He reverted to his topic. "There was nothing else?"

She thought for a moment.

"Nothing that counted, though he told me that he had a narrow shave with a fragment of shell that ploughed through his hair but glanced off, luckily. It left a slight flesh wound. He showed me the scar one day."

"Ah!" Taverner said no more.

They reached at last the long stone wall, the boundary of the "Enchanted Garden," and the porch where the stems of the creepers were burdened by the gathering weight of the snow. Dillon opened the door to them.

"Any change?" asked Sabine quickly.

"No m'm, he just the same." She took their coats and the wet umbrella and stood back for them to pass into the drawing-room.

Mark lay on the floor in the same stiff attitude, a cushion placed beneath his head. Sabine explained to the surgeon that they had been afraid to move him on account of the injured ankle.

"We think that in falling, he hit his head on the edge of the fender." She spoke in a nervous whisper.

Taverner nodded. She watched his long skilful hands pass over the prostrate figure and linger on the damaged limb.

"You're probably right." He looked up. "He fainted or slipped and instinctively tried to safeguard his right side, then came down with his full weight. Just come here for a moment." He saw Sabine hesitate and added quickly, "He's quite unconscious." He



bent lower, examining the fair head, parting the hair. "Is this where the shrapnel caught him?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. There's a scar. Well —" He rose to his feet. "I don't think you need be anxious. It's slight concussion. Probably he'll come round in an hour or two and, provided the ankle has escaped, which I can't guarantee at present, he'll not be much the worse for it. I think that we might undress him and get him up on that sofa. Unless there's a man about the place who would help me to carry him to his room?"

"There isn't. The gardener lives in the village — Steve too — but I could help."

Taverner frowned.

"He's too heavy. Just fetch me all he wants and your old nurse will lend a hand. We'll get him more comfortable."

Sabine obeyed. She was aware of a subtle change in Taverner's manner. Immersed in his case, he was aloof and authoritative. Friendship had faded into the background. She waited patiently in the hall whilst the pair saw to Mark, with a brief interval when she ran up to the nursery. Anthony was sound asleep, the housemaid, roused by Dillon, keeping guard in the next room.

When she returned she found the surgeon at the foot of the stairs.

"Where can I talk to you? He hasn't recovered consciousness. Dillon will fetch me when he does."

"In here," she opened the dining-room door. "I must light the lamp."

He struck a match and watched her turn up the wick.

"Now —" He drew a chair forward. "Sit down and listen to me. I don't think this is anything beyond a mere accident, but there's more in the case than meets the eye. I must tell you that I disagree utterly with the diagnosis that Vallance is suffering from shell shock. I suspect an injury to the brain. He gave me the clue himself to-night when he complained of a recurrent smell for which he could find no explanation."

Her eyes widened.



"A smell of *apples*?"

"Yes. I see he has told you about it. When did he first mention this?"

"The day after he returned. Since then it has been frequent."

"Exactly." Taverner frowned. "Would you say that he was susceptible to scents? For instance, does he notice particularly those of flowers?"

"No. That was what surprised me. I remember one day when he had worried Johnson over the apple question, I suggested that it might be a vase of heliotrope in the room. You know how strong it is in an enclosed space? I held it up to him, but he couldn't smell anything!" She saw Taverner's face light up with a subtle touch of triumph.

"That confirms me in my opinion. It's another symptom of what we call 'Jacksonian fits.' I don't want to be too technical so I'll try and explain simply." He was choosing his words with care. "These fits are the result of a depressed fracture — that is, a splinter of bone driven inwards by a blow, pressing upon the brain. When they arise from a lesion of the *sensory* area there is often no muscular demonstration or anything *you* would call a fit, but the patient is affected by a sensation of smell, or it may be taste, which is unaccountable. Do you follow me?"

"Quite," said Sabine.

"Such an attack may be followed by a period of weakness and reaction similar to the one you describe when Vallance could not detect the strong scent of the heliotrope and —"

She interrupted him; her quick brain forging ahead:

"Then you think the wound in the head was not so slight as they imagined?"

"I think it's the cause of his mental trouble." Taverner's face was very grave. "I propose, when he is well enough, to give Vallance my opinion. If he cares to act upon it I shall carry him off to a nursing home in London and operate. There should be no delay. Of course it's still open to doubt. We've only this single symptom to go by, so slight that it was overlooked in a busy hospital where his ankle seemed of the first importance — beyond the loss of memory which they ascribed to shell shock."



Sabine caught her breath.

"You mean —" She clutched Taverner's arm. "He'll *remember* — after the operation?"

"I can't say. If it's successful, the brain will recover its normal functions and, in course of time, memory may slowly return. There's a chance. But that's not the reason why I recommend the course. He can't go on as he is. It's dangerous. You can never tell what an injury to the brain may lead to."

"No." She controlled herself with an effort, for the wild hope had opened out a vista of possibilities which she hardly dared to contemplate.

Taverner's eyes were averted. He had fixed them absently on the old family portrait on the wall opposite; the uniform of scarlet and gold, so picturesque in contrast with the modern note of khaki.

"I don't connect the present condition with his head-wound," he went on, "though occasionally unconsciousness supervenes when the convulsion spreads to the opposite cortical area. We shall have to keep him very quiet. I gather" — he hesitated — "that he was disturbed before this happened? You must forgive my questioning you." He gave her a quick glance.

"You're right. We had a painful scene." The colour mounted to her brow but she continued stubbornly, "He refused to believe me when I told him the events of the past years. I had gone upstairs to start packing. We were off — by the first train."

Taverner frowned.

"You won't go now?" He saw the doubt creep into her eyes. "You can't — it's impossible. There mustn't be any further shock. Remember, you're dealing with a man whose mental condition is impaired. We share the responsibility. If it comes to that, it's part of our debt to the men who have fought and suffered for us. There'll be plenty of people to *forget*, when once peace is ratified." His voice grew hard for a moment. "But I don't class you with those." Across the corner of the table he held out his hand to her. The firm fingers closed on hers. He watched the struggle in her face.



At last she threw back her head and met his eyes.

"You can count on me. I will do whatever you think best."

"Thank you." He smiled gravely. "It may need all your patience. You must stay in the background at present and, if he agrees to the operation, I shall not let him return home until I'm fully satisfied. You will have the harder part to bear, waiting here without a sign — although we shall keep you fully informed."

"I could come to London — be somewhere near." For the moment she had forgotten the rupture between herself and Mark. She was picturing him in danger, dreading, as most women dread, the thought of the surgeon's knife.

The slip enlightened Taverner. Her love had survived the blow to her pride. He answered her, with inward pity.

"I should not allow you to see him."

"But I could call and inquire — or leave a letter," she persisted.

"No use. It wouldn't reach him. He will have no communication with the outside world until he leaves."

She looked at him rebelliously.

"I'm just to stay here and wait?"

"I'm afraid so. You and Anthony."

At the mention of the latter's name her full memory returned. She flared out impulsively.

"He doesn't believe that the child is his!"

Into Taverner's grey eyes came an unlooked-for sympathy.

"He will — when I've done with him."

"You think so?" The cry was wrung from her heart.

Taverner nodded.

"He'll see things in another light." He would give her at least the blessed hope. "So you must cheer up, Sabine."

Her face worked pitifully. Suddenly her control snapped. Her head went down on to her hands and the frozen flood of tears, pent up these long hours, found vent, thawed by his kindness.

Taverner did not try to check them. Here was relief for the strained nerves. He went noiselessly from the room his mission performed, back to his patient.



Sabine sobbed on. At last the door was opened softly. She became aware of warm old arms that stole round her; a crooning voice sounded in her ear:

"Hush then, Miss Sabine, honey!"

Startled, she raised her head.

"*Dilly!* And I've been wicked to you!"

Through her blurred eyes she could see the familiar wrinkles gathering round those of the fond old nurse, at once tender and humorous.

"'Dade and you was not, Miss Sabine, 'Tis owld Dilly that misjudged ye." Stoutly she denied the charge. But in her face was a hint of triumph. She had recovered her lost "child."



## CHAPTER XXIX

**T**HE sun had been shining brilliantly all day over a calm sea where not a ripple broke the surface of blue that faded into green in the shallows above the shelving rocks. It was hard to believe it was still winter, for the grass that fringed the edge of the combe was a vivid emerald and the tips of the boughs jutting out from the hazel grove were already forming little cones, aware of the rising sap.

Sabine had been touched by the spell of this premature awakening, full of restless impulses. Wandering down to the beach beyond the stone jetty, she had hired one of the few small boats with a sudden longing for exercise and had rowed out towards the point. It was an unusually high tide and the water had risen to within a foot of the floor of Crusoe's Cave. She wondered if it were possible to reach it in this fashion. The adventure tempted her. Standing upright in the boat she let it drift along the cliff, sounding the depth with a scull until she heard the keel grate on the ledge of rock beneath the opening. Then, with the painter in her hand, she jumped and from the sandy floor drew her craft still closer, securing it by means of a scull thrust into a cleft at the entrance.

She had not been there since the days when she had bathed with Elizma, but everything seemed untouched. She pulled out the deck-chair from under its old tarpaulin and settled down in a shaft of sunlight.

In three days Mark would be home. They had not met since the night of their painful scene. Following Taverner's advice she had kept to her room with the excuse — that was justified — of a chill, the result of her snowy walk. On the Tuesday following,



Mark had gone up to London and entered the nursing home. The operation had been successful from a surgical point of view, but there followed a long period of strain for Sabine and the constant doubt regarding the patient's mental condition. But little by little the careful watchers realized a change in him. His memory was slowly clearing, the lost years coming back with misty breaks in the sequence, and at last Elizma could tell her friend that Mark had been inquiring for her. Now he could recall the period of fighting in that third year of the war after his leave in England.

Sabine was thinking of this stage as she lay back in the low chair looking over the calm sea. It seemed a strange paradox that the veil now obscured those very months which had proved her sorest trial. In due course he would remember the hour of his narrow escape from death. If only he could forget the rest and return to her with unimpaired confidence! She was harassed by the fear of a sudden revulsion of feeling when light should break in on him regarding their second engagement and her perversion of the truth. But Taverner had decided that Mark was fit for normal life. He had left Nature to her task without any outside prompting, with one exception to the rule. Mark had been told of his wife's death and of his inheritance. Elizma had undertaken the task in the last week when Mark had been a guest of theirs at their house, constantly under Taverner's eye, a final test of his condition. Mark was impatient to return to Liddingcombe, and Elizma guessed the motive that underlay the desire. He had held no communication with Sabine or anyone outside the Home, obedient to the surgeon's wish; but Elizma had supplied him with news of the woman he loved and of his little son, recounting events of the summer when she had been at the Ferry House and ignoring subsequent disaster. He did not guess that she held the full history of their romance and this made him cautious in his questions. Although at times she was sorely tempted to admit to a greater knowledge, wisdom held her back. But to Sabine she wrote the full account of their long conversations, comforting her with the assurance of the love she divined and the promise of future happiness.



It seemed unbelievable to the lonely woman in Crusoe's Cave. She was haunted by the fear of some further stroke of Fate, longing yet dreading to see her lover. Would he find her changed? She looked down at her hands where the wedding ring hung loosely, for her fingers were thinner, betraying the strain, that had seemed never-ending, of the weeks that had followed Christmas Day. She was not the same radiant creature who had lazed there in bathing-dress on that golden day last summer, so confident in her warm beauty. Sorrow had left its mark on her.

The sun was beginning to lose its power, sinking towards the rim of the sea, and she shivered, suddenly aware of a fresh wind that had sprung up, forming a ripple on the water that sent the boat moored below bumping against the cliff. She replaced the chair, with a glance at the cupboard above, remembering the toast she had drunk with Mark and the libation offered to Neptune, in the innocent hours of their love. She was caught by a wave of superstition. Through invoking a pagan deity had they brought down on themselves the wrath of a higher Power? Or simply through breaking divine laws set in motion the endless cycle of cause and effect that Elizma preached — that balance held between good and evil?

Her mind recoiled from the problem, which frightened her by its vastness. Was free will a mockery, releasing through a single act of a human being machinery that God Himself could not check? She stood for a moment, hands clenched, mastering a feeling of panic, conscious of her impotence. She had never believed in predestination, which reduced man to the level of a trapped creature in the hands of a merciless Creator. For what was the use of free will if a man could not work out his salvation? It were better to be an animal, obeying blindly natural instincts.

Then, granted that man held the power to control his fate, where did God come in? A God who permitted man to act contrary to divine order for some purpose veiled in mystery! What part did He play in human existence outside the narrow bounds of religion?

She found the question hard to answer as she stared over the



open sea. But the thought filtered through her mind that to those who would not accept orthodox Church pronouncements with their comfortable hopes and beliefs, God must stand for eternal justice, not in this world, but the next. God was the Judgment Day.

Then what became of the "mercy" that Dillon believed in so firmly and of that amazing sacrifice, the lonely figure on the Cross? Even the dying thief had been pardoned, irrespective of his deeds. Why? Dillon would explain it by the theory of "repentance." Could repentance wipe out sin and weigh the eternal scales of justice?

Repentance: the very sound of the word was a menace to Sabine's pride. If man were captain of his soul, he should have the courage of his actions. To repent was to admit failure; a negation of that free will which made him superior to the beasts. Was this in truth what God designed? The *return* of that priceless gift, man's will submerged in the Almighty's?

She gave herself a little shake and stepped down into the boat. As she pushed off, a pearly shell caught her eye. She reached forward and captured it where it lay, loose, on the sandy shelf. She would take it home for Anthony. Placing it in her jersey pocket she settled down to the task of piloting her unwieldy craft out into open water. At last, free of sunken rocks, she settled the oars in the creaking rowlocks and began to pull steadily. A gull passed, swooping low on its homeward flight to the cliffs, uttering its mournful cry which was taken up by another. Over the heights of Lidding Moor a veil of mist was descending, whilst shadows crept along the beach to the edge of the line of sea-weed.

She glanced at the dark mass of rocks beyond the cove as she passed. Here she had first broken through the armour of Mark's silence. Across the combe she could see the fringe of the hazel grove, lace-like against the sky. It held the secret of that hour when her passionate will had prevailed. Did she regret the "breathless moment"? Her pride cried "no!" But something deeper than pride was stirred from its hiding-place in the recesses of her soul. Stubbornly she resisted the voice, still as the great



expanse of water with its curved sky-line that brought home the miracle of the round earth, swung like a globe in infinite space.

A wave broke against the stern and the cold spray, blown by the breeze, touched her face like fresh fingers in a furtive caress from the sea. She could hear the faint grinding noise of the tide ebbing over the shingle as she turned the bows of the boat shoreward. It awoke an earlier memory: the tug of the great rollers that had caught her heart-strings on the night when she had leaned out of the darkened window, alive to the first tumult of love. She could see again Mark's face and the sudden longing in his eyes, that was reflected in her own. She had satisfied that longing with the free gift of body and soul, without the material sense of a bargain that marriage and maintenance imply. Regret it? Never! She had won through. It was absurd to dread the future; her will would carry all before it.

She turned her head. Near the groin, that broke the force of the waves in stormy weather, stood an old fisherman, picturesque in his faded jersey, trousers rolled up to the knees, ready to wade into the surf and draw the boat into safety. With a last spurt she defeated his purpose, shipped her oars and sprang out.

"There!" She smiled with a touch of mischief into the weather-beaten face. "You couldn't have done it better yourself."

"That's trew, ma'am." He watched her draw out her purse and open it. "Be them oars easier? I giv' un a rare dab o' grease." He leaned forward and smeared the rowlocks with an appreciative thumb. "Thank you, ma'am." His rheumy eyes surveyed the coins she placed in his palms greedily and went back to his boat. "She'd do with a touch o' paint. But yu can't get it up along — not at a price as would pay for t'trouble."

"No, everything's very dear."

"It be, ma'am. 'Tis them profiteers."

Sabine smiled as she mounted the slope that led to the sea road. Old Higgs was a noted slacker, with a hard-working wife who supported him.

The exercise had made her glow and a fine colour shone in her cheeks, but her hands were cold from exposure and she thrust



them into her woollen pockets. In the left one was the smooth shell. She drew it out and examined it: the delicate curves of the little house with its gaping side entrance. How perfect it was! She bent closer. A tiny claw had protruded, that of a hermit crab. A profiteer of the ocean, living on the toil of another — the fancy drifted through her mind. It had ousted the lawful owner, quite possibly eaten him. Still intrigued by the problem of Nature's acceptance of the rule that "Might is Right," Sabine lifted the latch of the door and passed through, her eyes fixed on the absurd miniature of a lobster's limb which waved and receded, nipping the air.

"Sabine!" A voice called her with a note of eagerness and longing.

She looked up, startled. Mark was sitting on the little bench inside the porch.

"*You!*" There was no time for thought. Before he could rise she was kneeling before him, her hands desperately clutching his arms, her eyes searching his moved face. Even before he stooped and kissed her, she knew in her heart that all was well.

. . . . .  
A furtive step crossed the hall. Mark turned his head sharply, then smiled at Sabine.

"It doesn't matter. Every one will know soon."

In the speech she detected a touch of the old careless arrogance that had been missing these many months. She rose to her feet, suddenly shy, aware of her lover-like attitude.

"Know what?"

"That we're going to be married. You've not changed your mind, Sabine?" A swift anxiety clouded his eyes.

She met them steadily with her own. There was no need for an answer in words. After a second she spoke lightly to cover the emotion she felt.

"How did you come here? I didn't expect you, but you always turn up like a Jack-in-the-box!"

"Do I?" He looked surprised. "The fact was that Taverner decided at the last moment to run down to Polrennick for the



week-end, so we travelled together and parted at Exeter. In any case I was coming on Monday. I was longing to get to you. Say you're glad?"

"More than glad. If only I'd known. I went out rowing."

"So they told me. I'd half a mind to come down to the beach, but I wasn't sure where you'd land, and they said you'd be in to tea. Then I hunted for Anthony, but he was nowhere to be found. What's that?" He saw her glance at something she held in her hand.

"It's a shell. I was afraid I'd crushed it. I picked it up in Crusoe's cave. Take care — there's a crab inside." She laid it carefully in his palm.

"A prize?" He looked up into her face. "Do you remember those happy days?"

"I do." Joy flooded her. She saw his expression change.

"By Jove! That's brought it back. I took a pebble you'd given me to the Front as a mascot and I lost it the day before I was wounded. Yes, of course —" He stared past her, submerged in a wave of memory. His face grew hard, he straightened his shoulders.

"Don't think of it now." She touched his arm, guessing the picture conjured up of that forgotten grim defence before the German armies wavered.

"No." He gave himself a shake. "I'm glad though. It's further progress, as old Taverner would say. You don't know how good they were to me. I never can repay that debt." He stood up and took from the corner a pair of sticks. "Let's go inside. It's rather public out here."

She watched him, a glad light in her eyes.

"You've said good-bye to your crutches?"

"Yes, but I'm still a lame duck. Will you mind a cripple for a husband?"

She had moved forward but now she turned and glanced at him over her shoulder. Before she could answer he broke out:

"You're just the same, God bless you! I can see you now on that stormy day, looking like that in the archway, with your hair



all blown about by the wind. It haunted me — the first time I realized you were dangerous!" He followed her into the drawing-room and gave a quick glance round him. "New chintzes?"

She shook her head, then regretted the thoughtless action.

"Not quite."

"Ah." He closed the door with his shoulder. "I haven't remembered them — yet. But I shall." He spoke with grave assurance. "You mustn't laugh at me, sweetheart."

"I *couldn't!*" She was indignant.

Mark's blue eyes twinkled.

"I often laugh at myself — but that's quite a different matter! It's funny how a knock on the head can wipe out one's memory. But it's coming back, inch by inch. What worries me most is how I behaved in those months before my operation. Was I a great trouble to you?"

She hesitated. He sat down on the sofa by her side and took her hand in his own.

"Tell me, dearest? Let's have no secrets."

"Is it wise for you to talk of it?"

"Quite. I'm perfectly fit. It would be a relief to my mind."

She came to a swift decision. She would not wait for the veil to lift and for judgment to descend on her. He should have the whole truth now, since he was strong enough to bear it.

"You didn't remember me when you returned." She tried to keep her voice level.

Mark looked at her in horror.

"You mean I didn't *recognize* you?"

"No, but, mercifully, you fell in love with me again, so it came to the same thing in the end." She was trying to minimize the shock. "It was a strange experience; to watch you growing fond of me, unconscious of all that had passed and interested in Anthony without knowing he was your son —"

He broke in: "Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I?" She smiled proudly. "I was only the house-keeper. It was a peculiar position. Don't you see?"

"I do. Good Lord!"



Her clasp tightened on his hand.

"You're not to worry. It's over now. But I've something to confess, Mark."

He saw that she was plainly nervous and he drew her to him.

"Out with it! So long as it's not another man —"

She shook her head, absorbed, unsmiling, and went on, gathering courage:

"When, at last, you asked me to marry you I was faced with a great temptation — to leave you in ignorance. I couldn't bear to spoil the present by dragging up all the past. It seemed too — wonderful to have you loving me again." Against her will, her voice faltered.

"My poor child!" He held her close. "To think of all the suffering I've brought on you from first to last, through my own damned fault." His face worked. "It was wrong, Sabine. We should have waited. I've cursed myself many a time for my weakness and that month at Niton."

"It was *not* your fault." Her love prevailed. "It was mine. That's why I was ashamed to tell you when we got engaged and you had forgotten all that part. I lied to you. I kept up the farce that I was a soldier's widow and that Anthony was his son."

He gave an involuntary movement of disbelief and repugnance but she went on brokenly:

"When at last it came out, I found I had shattered your confidence. That's why you've got to know now, even if" — she choked — "you judge me."

"Judge you? Good God! When I've brought all this misery upon you. Why, what do you think I'm made of, Sabine? You've given me the final proof of your love in telling me all this. Something, too, that I hadn't hoped for."

She had hidden her face with her hands. He drew them down with a masterful touch, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"I'm going to be equally honest with you. I was disappointed. That leave at Niton was spoilt for me by the way you looked on our relationship. You seemed to take it all so lightly, to live only in the present and to treat it more like an adventure. I



couldn't blame you. It was my fault. Whatever you think, it always is a man's fault in a case like ours. He may be weak enough to claim the old excuse of the flesh, a stronger temptation than the woman's, but he holds the casting vote, and if there's a child he's to blame. It was Anthony's birth that opened my eyes. It's to Anthony we must look for judgment. We can never undo that wrong, Sabine. The responsibility was mine, but I longed for some sign from you of the same feeling. You didn't give it. It altered my opinion of you — of the serious side of your character. I couldn't tell you down at Niton. I arranged that the boy should not suffer in the event of my death, but to open my heart to you on the subject became more difficult every day. It seemed such canting hypocrisy. To accept all that you had offered and then ask you to 'repent'!" His nostrils curled scornfully. "I told myself I was narrow-minded. You had lived so long abroad that you had adopted a lighter creed, believing that love excused all. But I was ashamed when I thought of the child. To you he seemed a new delight — just an added element of romance. But with me it was *never* an adventure. It was partnership for life; with, or without, marriage. I could never look on you as a mistress, nor the child as the usual 'accident.' It went so much deeper than that."

He paused for a moment, then continued:

"I prayed for my wife's death. There were times in the trenches when my own seemed the better remedy. Though I loved you I was disillusioned. You mustn't mind my saying this, because it all belongs to the past. The fact that you were ashamed to revert to it when I came back, broken both in mind and body, shows me how much I misjudged you. You regret it too?" He stopped abruptly.

Sabine flinched. She was faced at last with a definite decision, the choice between the call of her soul and the obstinate pride that had become master of her will and actions. Already that afternoon there had been an unequal contest between them. Now Mark forced the issue.

In the hush that had succeeded his speech a sound from with-



out fell on her ears, the creaking of a mail-cart wheel. It was followed by a low murmur of women's voices, Johnson's shriller, then a child's glad cry. The door burst open; Anthony stood with excited face on the threshold.

A hand in a white cotton glove shot out and seized his shoulder, but, wriggling free, he escaped and ran across the room to Mark.

"Big Man!" He shouted the welcome. His hat fell back. Heedless of it, the elastic half-strangling him, he scrambled up into Mark's arms.

Sabine saw the two heads, dark and fair, for a moment meet. Then her lover balanced the child on his knee; his eyes searched searchingly over him. For the first time he recognized Anthony as his flesh and blood, but behind the pride in his face was the pain that he strove to disguise. A lump rose in the mother's throat. Never could Anthony call him "Father," and if marriage should result in further children the first-born must be prepared to renounce his inheritance. This was what the "breathless moment" had brought to the pair she loved best.

Some wave of telepathy reached the man. He glanced at her across the child, and she answered the question in his eyes inaudibly, her lips shaping the words:

"I regret it."

It came with the force of a physical wrench that brought the tears welling up. She stood convicted by herself: the deepest shame that a heart can know. But as she met the love and faith in the blue eyes bent to her level a strange peace succeeded the storm. Mark's free arm went round her, the other holding the little boy. He narrowed the circle.

"Kiss your mother!"

Anthony, wide-eyed, obeyed. There had been a note of command in the voice, of virile pride and possession.

Through the open door Dillon heard it and quivered, her hands clasped together. The Saints had remembered an old woman. Now she could depart in peace.



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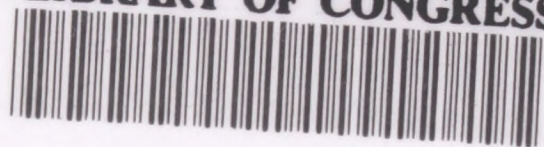








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